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# Narrating, Performing and Feeling a 'Religion': On Representations of Judaism

**Abstract:** This article aims to use Judaism as a privileged case to discuss how religious representations were produced, circulated, and influenced Jewry against the backdrop of a rising modernization during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Furthermore, I claim that representations of Judaism were not exclusively produced by cultural agents, such as scholars and intellectuals, but they were performed into a wider cultural and political arena where they were appropriated or misunderstood, creating communities, or fueling debates over society. I claim that, despite its limited demographic dimensions, Judaism, its history and symbolism, became a point of departure to discuss issues related to modern society and religion at large.

**Keywords:** Modernity, urbanism, Judaism, messianism, prophetism, Semitism, nostalgia, Orientalism, performance, science, diaspora

## 1 The un-binding of Prometheus: science and Judaism

The period between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterized by extraordinary creativity in terms of analytical tools and methodology applied to culture, society, and religion. New disciplines were founded, although the boundaries between them were not strictly defined, and all of them, from anthropology to sociology, from psychology to comparative philology, were involved in the analysis of the 'religious fact', which in turn required a definition of religion.<sup>1</sup>

In those times, scholars were giants whose *mythopoiesis* was parallel to the creation of ancient mythological narratives, as Karoly Kerényi stressed when writing about Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.<sup>2</sup> The 'un-bound of Prometheus' (Landes 1969) unleashed a bounty of creativity, a positive attitude toward worldly activities, providing a whole new set of concepts with which to map the social and symbolical realms: the one inhabited by humans and the other inhab-

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1 A definition in Azria, Hervieu-Léger, 2010.

2 Kerényi in Freud, Italian version, 1969; Facchini 2008.

ited by the gods. Many intellectuals claimed that religion was doomed, due to the difficulties that religious communities were facing in coping with a society that was changing rapidly because of industrialization and modernization. Nevertheless, religion still attracted deep interest among scholars, reformers, and politicians.

'Science' – wrote Stefan Zweig, a famous Austrian Jewish writer – 'was the archangel of progress'<sup>3</sup> and accordingly, this was the period when 'scientification of religion' produced many accounts and descriptions of Judaism that played relevant roles in the public domain.<sup>4</sup>

Judaism may be an appropriate case-study to describe the transformation that religion underwent in the modern period, especially if the scholar is able to link the realm of discourses and representations to the realm of social reality. This article aims to use Judaism as a case-study to discuss how religious representations were produced, circulated, and influenced Jewry against the backdrop of a rising modernization. More specifically I claim that, despite its demographic irrelevance, Judaism, its history and symbolism, became a point of departure to discuss issues related to modern society and religion at large.

The attempt to reconstruct Judaism as a 'modern religion' implies an understanding of the social and cultural context of the time, which usually leads to notions of modernity and 'secularization'. If modernity is difficult to define properly, 'secularization' is definitely an inaccurate notion for the period in question, and scholars are increasingly questioning it.<sup>5</sup> However, modernization is a notion that addresses the Jews with special relevance. If modernity is, in the words of Yuri Slezkine, 'about everyone becoming urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible', and 'about learning to cultivate people and symbols', then it is undoubtedly true that Jews were fully involved in those processes (Slezkine 2004).

As Jewish social success in the modern period increasingly became more visible and measureable, intellectuals started to ask whether it was linked to religion. Observing the social and economic performances of Catholic minorities – or more broadly of nations that had a strong Catholic tradition, as in the case of

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3 Zweig 1942, 'Fewer cripples and maimed and persons with goiters were seen on the streets, and all of these miracles were accomplished by science, the archangel of progress. Progress was also made in social matters; years after years new rights were accorded to the individual, justice was administered more benignly and humanely, and even the problem of problems, the poverty of the great masses, no longer seemed insurmountable.'

4 For the term scientification, von Stuckrad 2014.

5 Martin 1979; Bremmer 2008; Asad 2003; Pérez-Agote 2013.

Italy or Spain – led to the inference that religion influenced social behavior and economic performance (Ferrari Zumbini 2001).

As Slezkine aptly argued, representations of Judaism varied as a positive or negative image was attached to modernity. In other words, if the critic's outlook on the modern world was positive, then the Jewish achievement was celebrated. If, on the other hand, the critic feared modernity, as in the case of Houston Stewart Chamberlain or Werner Sombart, Judaism was seen as strange and dangerous. Thorstein Veblen, the American sociologist, attributed Jewish preeminence not to Jewish tradition, but precisely to its radical rejection (Veblen 1919). Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu – the French intellectual who so deeply loved American democracy – stressed, in a famous book against anti-Semitism, that modernity was not created by Jews, but that Jews, by virtue of the rejection of their religious identity, became its best practitioners. He insisted that modernity started, in fact, with Christians of varying beliefs, and therefore the modern world was the outcome of Christian culture (Facchini 2010).

In the case of Judaism, the modern period is of great interest because Jewish society, more than other cultures, faced extraordinary challenges. Moreover, what especially fascinates about this period is that the diversity of the Jewish diaspora, a critical attitude toward tradition, and modernization all contributed to the diffusion of a wealth of images of Judaism, ranging from negative to positive, which often entangled with other cultural and political issues. To write about Judaism keeping in mind all those entanglements is a fascinating – and yet difficult – task.

But what shall we say about Judaism, the religion that had somehow contributed to tying together Jews since the destruction of the second temple, as the core master narrative would claim? Is it a religion, first of all? If yes, is it a viable religion to face the rise of the modern world? Is this religion able to cope with the challenges of this new world? These were some of the questions debated among scholars, religious leaders, philosophers, and intellectuals. Quite often the debate involved Christians as well.

Where do I start if I want to offer a representation of Judaism in the modern age? Shall I start from the 'community', following Durkheim's idea that a religious system, among other things, is defined by the presence of a community (Durkheim 1912)? That is actually very relevant as, in fact, Judaism may be represented without Jews, being such a rhetorical and symbolical trope of Christianity (Nirenberg 2013). But let us say that we decide to begin with the concept of community, what kind of community do we search for? How do we locate the group that contributed to the making of Judaism? Was the definition drawn

from the *Halakhah* sufficient, in the modern age, to define membership?<sup>6</sup> And then, are Jews necessarily tied to religion? What kind of religion? And if not, who then are they? Are they Jews or are they something different once they leave religion or a traditional way of life?<sup>7</sup>

All these questions are of great relevance, especially against the backdrop of modernization. Although it is undeniable that group formation in earlier periods was more complex than is usually thought, in modern times options for membership varied to an extent that was previously unknown. ‘Who is a Jew?’ is one of those questions that haunted modern society, Jews and Gentiles alike.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say that, as happened for other religious groups, Jews were often defined by non-Jews, and especially by the legislation according to which they negotiated their corporate and individual lives. Membership in Judaism was not therefore just a matter of rabbinic law, as notions of peoplehood, nationhood, religion and, last but not least, race were defined and questioned in different areas of the Diaspora world.

However, if we try to visualize what Jews may have looked like at the turn of the nineteenth century, it is better to think of some images, which may capture the perception of the plausible community.

## 2 A cultural geography of Judaism

We could take several photographs that capture the overarching world of Jewish Diaspora. Together with Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim, who despite their commitment to modern society never left their own communities, we could choose among dozens of bourgeois middle class intellectuals or professionals who actively toiled within and integrated into their societies. We might select family photographs depicting Jews in their traditional attire. Their garments betrayed their social class and the local culture: we could observe women and men

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<sup>6</sup> Traditional Jewish life was ruled by the authority of *halakhah*, rabbinic law, which depended on the recognition of the host society. During the nineteenth century, the process of political emancipation slowly eroded rabbinic law, leaving ample areas of civic law to be ruled by the law of the state. Many conflicts arose as far as concerned norms relating to marriage, inheritance, and so forth. These questions opened up an interesting debate. For some discussion: Katz 1973; Berkovitz 2004. The literature on emancipation and assimilation is plenty.

<sup>7</sup> Endelman 2015.

<sup>8</sup> David Ben Gurion launched an international debate when in 1952 he asked ‘Who is a Jew?’. Criteria were then different from the ones in the nineteenth century, because they were defined by the organization of the state of Israel.

in Moroccan or Turkish outfit together with Jews portrayed in the American Far West. We would have to notice, alongside the deployment of wealth and status, pictures of tremendous poverty, which may be gathered from the villages in the Pale of Settlement to the peddlers in New York.<sup>9</sup> We would encounter, following such travelers' reports as Joseph Roth's *Juden* or Albert Londres' *Le Juif errant*,<sup>10</sup> poverty stricken Hasidic Jews living isolated in the mountains of Ruthenia, or fierce Mountain Jews of the Caucasus. On the roadway to Asia we would encounter Chinese and Indian Jews.<sup>11</sup>

If we could travel back in time and send a questionnaire inquiring about religious experience, more or less as William James did in his path breaking research on the 'varieties of the religious experience',<sup>12</sup> we would find shared common practices and beliefs, but also differences from place to place. Some Jews would have expressed attachment and devotion to rabbinical Judaism as it kept its authority over the community, and especially to norms and rituals. Others would have emphasized their rejection of traditional faith in order to enjoy fully the pleasures of urban culture and modernity. Still others would have converted to different religions, and not necessarily, as Heinrich Heine stressed, 'as the entry ticket to Christian society' (Bauman 1988; Mendes Flohr, Reinhartz 2010). Then as well, we would have encountered personal interpretations of religion and Judaism. Some Jews would even have developed theories about its deep historical role in the great narrative of humankind's development. Maybe we would face some significant differences along the gender divide.<sup>13</sup>

From Odessa to Berlin, from Florence to Paris, from London to New York, from Tesseloniki and Alexandria to the villages of the Pale of Settlement, Jews, women and men, would know they were Jewish, but would also be involved and partake in the social and cultural life of their society, at times with very different agendas (Facchini 2011). Herein, I try to highlight how being Jewish entailed a number of different allegiances, and even if it implied a certain degree of attachment to traditional religious values, it also entailed a certain amount of criticism or rejection of traditional lifestyles.

Furthermore, being Jewish and being religious became, in the course of time, increasingly disconnected, as the notion of religion itself was never stable, and its definition clearly influenced the politics of religious identity. The features of

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<sup>9</sup> For pictures of American Jewish life see: <http://access.cjh.org>

<sup>10</sup> Roth 1927; Londres 1930.

<sup>11</sup> The controversy about Chinese Jewry was inaugurated by the Jesuits: Davidson Kalmar, Penlar 2004; for Indian Jews see Katz 2013.

<sup>12</sup> James 1902.

<sup>13</sup> On Judaism and women see Baskin 1998; Kaplan 1991; Hyman 1995; Salah 2015.

Judaism were therefore changing, and the whole of the Jewish world never agreed upon one single shared interpretation of what Judaism was and was going to become.

If we look at the geography of the Jewish diaspora, three over-arching issues shall be outlined. The first issue refers to the host society. In the nineteenth century most Jews dwelled in culturally Christian-driven areas, albeit under different ‘regimes of religious toleration’ – among which, the rising national state (Walzer 1999). Their settlements were placed in the midst of three multi-religious and multi-national empires: the Russian, the Habsburg, and the Ottoman. The partitioning of Poland provoked the incorporation of densely populated Jewish areas both in the Habsburg and the Russian empires. Enforced Russification and religious conflict became two recurrent issues in some areas of Eastern Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Jews also constituted a part of Muslim societies, where they represented a minority under Ottoman rule and other Muslim cultures, as in Morocco. The history of Judaism in these societies has been overlooked, although it should be properly investigated for our purpose. The religious features of ‘Sephardic Judaism’, at least the variety that blossomed in Muslim societies, were influenced by some regional elements, namely special local traditions and policies of modernization. Alongside the main Jewish ritual practices tied to life cycles and shared public liturgy, other rituals were created, some of which bear similarities to local Muslim traditions or to the development of certain beliefs, which were spread also in other areas, like the fear of evil spirits (*dybbuks*) or the cult of charismatic leaders.<sup>15</sup>

The second over-arching issue, to which we may only briefly refer, relates to ‘modernizing agencies,’ which were also interconnected with the rise of nationalism. As the reader would imagine, this certainly makes our picture extremely complex. Who were those interested in modernizing Jews from Muslim countries? What exactly did it imply to become an Ottoman or a Moroccan Jew? How did the Jewish elite appropriate modernizing ideologies? In this very case, a different world-view coalesced, as German, French, and British Jewish agencies mingled with these communities, providing educational programs and expertise. The *Alliance israélite universelle* was just one of the most influential agencies to exert its influence in many Mediterranean countries.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Frankel 1981; Frankel 1997; Frankel 2009.

<sup>15</sup> I give general references to the history of Jews in Arab lands or Muslim countries: Bashkin 2012; Marglin 2014; Cohen 2014; Cohen, Abrevayeva 2014; Abecassis, Direche, Aouad 2012; Levy 2011; Miccoli 2011; Schreier 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Harrus 2001; Rodrigue 2003; Kaspi 2010.

This rough map of the Jewish diaspora aims at highlighting the question of political rights and emancipation, along with the subsequent public discussion about 'religion' which was, with the exception of the Habsburg empire, conducted in countries like France, England or Germany, not to mention Italy, all of which hosted very small communities. In order to reduce the level of ethnocentrism, which has characterized the debate on Judaism and modernity, and leaving aside the scholarly research on the era of political emancipation, it is worth mentioning that, as far as Jews and Judaism in Muslim countries is concerned, representations of religion were pivotal in guiding the path to modernization or its rejection. One story evokes this quite clearly. In his book *In an Antique Land*, the renowned writer Amitav Ghosh narrates the story of the discovery of the Cairo Genizah, recalling how Solomon Schechter, the great British Jewish Hebraist born into a Hasidic family from Romania and who eventually became one of founders of Conservative Judaism in America, felt uncomfortable with Egyptian Jewry while trying to disclose the complex reality of their medieval history (Ghosh 1992). Whilst Jewish elites in Muslim countries modernized as much as their European counterparts, the rest of the community remained a sort of Orientalized other, whose voices were never fully acknowledged. Moreover, the past of medieval Jews in the Muslim world became increasingly idealized as a model for modernity.<sup>17</sup>

I shall return to the question of the 'inner Orient', which was embedded in many Jewish trajectories of the time, and was accordingly rejected, romanticized, and/or appropriated. What I shall stress now is the fact that these communities were part of a system of representations, which entered the scholarly imagination and the modernizing policies of their society. These images contributed to nurturing the debate over religion and ethnicity, or religion and nationalism, and of course, religion and modernity. Furthermore, the rise of Zionism would contribute to making the picture even more complex, although we will not touch upon it.

The geography of Judaism discloses another structural element of Jewish society: migration and, inevitably, mobility. Subsequent to the disruptive effects of the aftermath of the Spanish expulsion (1492), which caused a remarkable number of Jews and new Christians to leave and search for better settlements, the Jewish diaspora began stabilizing (Israel 2002). In the nineteenth century, however, the Jewish diaspora underwent a second major wave of migration, mainly

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<sup>17</sup> Jewish philosophy in Medieval Muslim culture became a model for rational religion. Works on Maimonides and other medieval philosophers occupied especially German *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Seidler 2007; Hughes 2010; Hughes 2014. Interesting, at least for the American reception, the works of Leo Strauss 2013.

due to poverty, religious persecution, and political oppression. Migration is a key issue for the understanding of Judaism in this period because Jews had to relocate in different cultures and therefore translate their religious heritage into a different context. The first and most relevant wave of migrants until the 1920s moved to North America, where they created forms of Judaism that suited or could integrate into that society, while minor waves were directed to South America and Palestine, the latter under the Ottoman rule and then the British mandate.

As historians have recently suggested, a huge migration wave was directed toward the cities of the Russian empire and later to the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> As one should just imagine, this part of the Jewish diaspora, as much as part of their Christian counterpart, was destined to ‘kill religion’, especially everything that was connected with the world of tradition. However, the murder of religion proved to be a complicated attempt and, as we shall see, it was exactly from this world that Jews reinterpreted part of their traditional heritage through means of new media, such as literature, cinema, or photography. In order to understand how religious representations were produced and how we shall represent Judaism in the age of modernity, the relationship between religion and migration is a key element.<sup>19</sup>

A final issue we must mention, which is related to the alleged consequences of modernization and migration, that is ‘urbanization’. Judaism was a relatively urban religion even in the early modern period, although in Eastern Europe the village was the most typical form of settlement. In Muslim countries as well, Jewish quarters, known under the name *mellah*, were generally at the center of the city, although it is undeniable that other forms of settlement in non-urban contexts also existed.

From the nineteenth century on, the impact of urbanization, both westward and eastward, was extremely dramatic. Millions of people left Southern and Eastern Europe for the New World – leaving behind violence and poverty but also families and social relationships. They entered a web of different relations, which had begun with the journey from their native lands and ended with their arrival in their new homes. Religion was a cultural element that had to be addressed once the immigrant reached the new country. Although immigrants were often politically engaged with modern parties or secular ideologies, especially the ones who had joined socialist and anarchist groups in their home-

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<sup>18</sup> Slezkine 2004; Bemporad 2013; Veidlinger 2009; Veidlinger 2016.

<sup>19</sup> For American Jewish history and religion see Sarna 1997; Diner 1992; Howe 1976; Soyfer 1997.



lands, 'religion' remained one of the many features that contributed to their social integration. Therefore, the 'translation' of Judaism into the cultural language of the host society was one of the most important tasks that Jewish leaders and intellectuals endeavored to complete in any possible context, particularly in the emerging metropolises of the new world.

### 3 The White City: exhibiting religions

In order to grasp the relevance of the urban character of the period I would like to turn to one very relevant event for the understanding of my article. In 1893 the city of Chicago hosted quite a symbolical event. Alongside the 'World's Columbian Exposition' the emerging industrial metropolis organized the first 'World's Parliament of Religions', offering which might be called the first ecumenical ingathering of representatives of different religious traditions.<sup>20</sup> What made the event striking was the public visibility of religions, which were known only to a fairly small number of scholars. Although Protestants were in the majority, a significant number of representatives of different religions attended. Three eminent rabbis and scholars represented Judaism: Emil Hirsch and Kaufman Kohler, supporters of the newborn Reform Judaism that had originated in Germany at the beginning of nineteenth century, and H. Pereira Mendes of the more conservative Sephardi synagogue of New York.<sup>21</sup>

Precisely due to its millenarian flavor, the Fair and its Parliament of Religions are ideal contexts to catch the atmosphere of the time. The context of the Fair deployed both the global discourse on religion and the superiority of Christianity, whilst downplaying the most disruptive phenomena of the time, colonialism and racism.

Before I develop a bit on the relationship between fairs and religion, it is useful to ask how Judaism was turned into a 'world religion', given its demographic irrelevance and its historical aversion to missionary work.<sup>22</sup> Tomoko Ma-

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<sup>20</sup> Burg 1976; Badger 1979; Appelbaum 1980.

<sup>21</sup> Lévy Kaufmann Kohler (1843–1926) and Emil Hirsch (1851–1923) were architects of Reform Judaism in America, and they were committed to the cause of the modernization of Jewry, which to them meant acculturation and Americanization. They were also important theologians, whose works we cannot analyze here. Meyer 1995; De Lange 2000; Facchini 2008; Cohen 2008; Langton 2010.

<sup>22</sup> See Eisenstadt's remark on this issue, which draws from the genetics of monotheistic taxonomy. For Eisenstadt what characterizes Judaism as a civilization is its being part of the axial age cultures, and the bearer of both a universal and particular religious worldview. Eisenstadt 2003.

suzawa has attempted in part to explain this scholarly enterprise, although its history deserves more detailed research and a methodological reassessment (Masuzawa 2005). What is more relevant, going beyond taxonomies that do not necessarily work in every context, one should be reminded that Judaism was also defined by features quite opposite to the notion of a ‘world religion’, since it was described as an archaic fossil, a remnant of a deluded past, a racial and racist religion, or as a religion unable to create any sort of civilization; last but not least, it was often described as a criminal religion.<sup>23</sup>

These images were partly derived from the interaction between discourses on religion stemming from the realm of scholarly research – yet, not necessarily institutionalized within academia – and the heritage of a polemical attitude nurtured by Christian traditions and its ingrained supersessionism.<sup>24</sup>

Be that as it may, at the Columbian Exposition, representatives of different religious traditions emphasized the greatness of their faiths. World Fairs were one of the most important types of social and cultural gathering of the second half of nineteenth century, and they continued to be quite relevant public events well into the twentieth century. From them, we do know what representatives of different religions claimed and wrote, how they presented their religious traditions, and what they wanted to achieve, as scholars and leaders of religious communities.

The functioning of the World Fairs offers an unusual and yet privileged point of departure in order to assess how religion and modernity may be approached because the World Fairs displayed and narrated, among other things, a certain story about religion and modern society. In the case of the Chicago Exhibition, for example, one could underline *two narratives*. The first one derives from what representatives of different traditions narrated within the framework of a ‘world parliament’. Historians have observed that each representative – Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and so forth – voiced certain features of his/her religious tradition, which drew from a shared set of notions and some sort of modern knowledge. Although they were selected to fulfill the political and cultural agenda of the Exhibition, it is worth saying that they also voiced their own agendas. Catholics and Jews felt the necessity to prove they were as modern as Prot-

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**23** I especially think of the spread and dissemination of ‘blood libel’ charges that greatly increased in the nineteenth century. Bibliography is vast. I refer mainly to Lindemann 1991; Frankel 1997; Walser Smith 2002; Biale 2008; Weinberg 2014; Levin 2014; Zweig 1915.

**24** Supersessionism or replacement theology is a contested notion that describes a theological doctrine, created among some of the early Church fathers, according to which the *verus Israel* was the Church, and the Jews were to be considered remnants of the old covenant, unable to understand their own Scriptures. Bori 1983; Fredericksen 2008; Tapie 2014; Simon 1983.

estants, whereas Asians, despite their differences, aimed at unity, which was meant to express, *vis-à-vis* the Protestant sense of universalism and cultural superiority, a similar grand narrative of Oriental religious traditions (Kittelstrom 2009). The experiment of early ecumenism made it possible for each one of them to set forth a certain seminal role of each tradition: for instance, Jews stressed the universal and social agenda of Judaism, and Swami Vivekananda's opening address highlighted how the noblest and most ancient tradition of religious tolerance was grounded in Hinduism.<sup>25</sup>

Out of the context of the World Fairs there is another narrative I want to pinpoint, which is related to the visual and material narration of religion, and which seems to prefer the language of nostalgia or tradition, even when it selected modern means of communication. As Richard Cohen has indicated, the World Exhibition (*Exposition universelle*) held in Paris in 1878 not only featured an exhibition of the first collection of Judaica (sacred objects) – opening up the notion of 'Jewish art' – but it also conveyed a feeling of 'nostalgia' for the 'ghetto' (Cohen 1998). Jewish ritual objects, which in the previous centuries were part of a visual narrative related to the written word, were now exhibited as a testimony of a vanishing world, the world of the fathers. The same rationale inspired the Anglo-Jewish exhibition held in London in 1887, and to an extent the exhibit of American Indian ritual art in Chicago in 1893.

Representations of religion were produced, exhibited, and sometimes performed. Religious images and images of religion were not just part of a discursive endeavor, they were meant to capture religious life as it was, even when it faded away. They displayed nostalgia, and yet they portrayed and exhibited the richness of religious experiences.

## 4 Performing religion

In this chapter I will provide some examples of how scholarly analyses of religious beliefs had a second life, as in fact they could be performed through appropriation and adaptations using other media, such as theatre plays, opera, fictional narrative, visual art. Religious notions that were analyzed by scholars and intellectuals were also performed in the public arena, once they were used within a specific political and religious agenda.

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<sup>25</sup> Swami Vivekananda was an Indian guru who became famous around Europe and America after the Chicago World Fair. He paved the way to the appreciation of Indian philosophy and religion in the West, stressing the superiority of Asian spirituality. Flood 1996.

Prophetism, messianism, and the notion of ‘Semites’ were the creation of scholarly discourse on religion.<sup>26</sup> The first two themes are both ancient and modern, meaning that they do have a long history, which is linked to the polemics of religious confrontation. The third one is a sheer invention of modern scholarship, as in fact the notion of the ‘Semites’ is much indebted to comparative linguistics, one of the most powerful hermeneutical and methodological enterprises of the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.1 Prophecy

Prophecy was a key concept in nineteenth century scholarship. The work of exegetes and biblical scholars on prophecy, especially in Germany and the Netherlands, greatly contributed to a new insight into biblical texts, while conceptualizing different modes of religious experience that would roughly coincide with national, universal and sectarian forms of religion (Kuenen 1882). The results of the most outstanding research were appropriated and accordingly reinterpreted in other countries. Both Jewish and Catholic reception was cautious, not to say suspicious. By the beginning of the twentieth century ‘ethical prophecy’ became a classical topic of the sociology of religion (Weber 1922 and 1963).

However, I shall highlight how research on the meaning of biblical prophecy was not exclusively discussed within the borders of academia; in fact, it was also performed by religious leaders, social reformers, and political activists.

Exploiting the teaching of the prophets, I.N. Mannheimer, a Jewish German rabbi who sympathized with religious reform, preached about justice and freedom during the German Revolution of 1847/48.<sup>28</sup> Freedom and social justice were the key notions through which biblical prophecy was given new meaning and strength.<sup>29</sup> Prophecy afforded a more appropriate means of communication, a more effective and *affective* way to reach the public. For example, a theatre play, *The prophet (Il profeta 1866)*, written by the Italian Jewish politician David Levi, entered the public arena of patriotism. Now forgotten, this theatre play received positive responses and was considered, by literary critics of his

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<sup>26</sup> We lack a systematic genealogy of these notions and concepts. For modern scholarship see Scholem 1971; for a critical appraisal, Wasserstrom 1999.

<sup>27</sup> It constituted a contested notion since its invention: see Leroy-Beaulieu 1894; Oesterreicher 1941 (a theological perspective); Poliakov <sup>2</sup>1991; Olender 1989; Olender 2009; Anijdar 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer 1995; Miller 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Facchini 2014.

time, one of the most sublime examples of Jewish 'national literature' (Facchini 2005; Grazi 2015).

In those years in France, Joseph Salvador and Ernest Renan confronted each other over the role prophecy would eventually play for the future of the universal religion of humankind (Facchini 2005). Where was the 'religion of humanity' to be located? Should it be rooted in the Bible or should it be located elsewhere? If it were to be located in the Bible, where exactly? Did it dwell among the Jews, or among the Christians?

Furthermore, the teachings of the prophets were to be encoded in the 'Pittsburg Platform' of 1885, which inaugurated the social life of the Reform Movement in Judaism in the United States (Meyer 1995; Sarna 2005). Its role was destined to increase in defining Jewish ethics for the modern world. Prophecy coped with the language of social conflict and it accordingly offered a template to link tradition and modern problems, which were visible through the impact of industrial capitalism. Social reformers were by no means godless men and women. They, in fact, called for the implementation of the word of God, and offered alternative discourses *vis-à-vis* socialist and communist movements. A concern for social justice drawn from biblical prophets would easily overlap with images of Jewish suffering, which became also tangible through emigration, when the *Ostjuden* flocked to European metropolises. One lyrical example is sound: in the 1930s, in the midst of rabid anti-Semitism, the French Catholic Charles Peguy claimed that he saw the faces of the prophets and their suffering among the Jewish immigrants who lived in Paris (Pierrard 1997; Aronowicz 1998).

## 4.2 Messianism

For the time being disregarding its polemical genealogy, we can turn to debates on Messianism as they intertwined between scholarly, religious, and political realms. As a polemical key concept that could be politically charged, Jewish messianism was handled with caution especially because it conveyed the idea of 'dual loyalty', referring to the restoration of a Jewish kingdom. Would the Jews be loyal citizens if they still waited for the restoration of the ancient kingdom?

In the nineteenth century, especially the Jews of Western Europe were eager to reformulate the notion of religious messianism in order to reconstruct a Jewish community within the borders of the hosting country which was their national home. In order to pursue such a political goal, it was necessary to revise prayer books and ritual practice. It was also indispensable, in order to reassure the host society, to demonstrate that the history of the 'messianic idea' was more compli-

cated than imagined. Philology and history would eventually prove it (Scholem 1971; Goldish 2004).

The conflict over the interpretation of the messianic idea took place, once again, between Jews who held different notions of religion, and between Jews and Christians. Yosef Klausner, whose portrait appears in Amoz Oz's novel titled *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Oz 2005), was right when he remarked that none but one scholar before him had extensively analyzed the history of the notion of messianism (Klausner 1955). That scholar was the Italian David Castelli, whose work was published in 1873. Castelli's book reconstructed different trends of Jewish messianism, offering a nuanced and complex depiction of a very critical concept to a broader audience of Jews and Gentiles. It is no wonder that Klausner, who was a committed Zionist and a scholar of ancient Judaism and the historical Jesus, appreciated the scholarly achievements while expressing a strong criticism toward the 'cosmopolitan ideology' which, according to him, permeated the whole work (Facchini 2005). I cannot illustrate further the European debate over these issues,<sup>30</sup> but I wish to stress at least two elements. The first one refers to a more general European trend to de-politicize traditional religions. A similar pressure to redefine the relationship between the political and the spiritual was exerted towards the Catholic Church as well, against a background of the rise of the national state.<sup>31</sup> Commitment to patriotic values and love for the land seem to prefer religious communities whose religion would be *spiritual* and universal. The relationship between nationalism and religion proved to be much more complicated: on the one hand, secular patriotism kept incorporating religious and Christian symbolism, and on the other hand, religious groups attempted to regain political power.

The second element related to notions of messianism in the nineteenth century refers to its reconfiguration in terms of a redemptive language associated with the myth of progress that very soon was used for the political enterprise of Zionism, and also reinterpreted as a key idea of nationalism.

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<sup>30</sup> For the German context in the nineteenth century, see Kohler 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Literature on the conflict between Church and State is ample. The debate over the temporal power of the church was discussed among Liberal Catholics in the nineteenth century. For the Italian case, where the conflict was particularly strong, see Jemolo 1948.

## 5 Performing nostalgia and emotions

As I already mentioned, what characterizes the rich trove of representations of Judaism in the modern period is also the presence of negative depictions. Scholars of anti-Semitism have properly reconstructed that imagery.<sup>32</sup> I wish here to develop a more nuanced and complex picture. I will turn now to the notion of *orientalism* as it is linked to the image of the Semites.<sup>33</sup>

Although the notion of the 'Semites' may be tied to the idea of an 'Oriental tribe', found among late Enlightenment's discourse, it is more appropriate to analyze it as new concept that was produced by nineteenth century scholarship, in particular comparative philology. This notion was ambivalent as it classified religions and cultures through the marker of language, specifically Hebrew and Arabic (and of course other cognate ones).<sup>34</sup> It became loaded with negative meanings when the taxonomy became hierarchically compelling, following in the path of evolutionary biology. The concept entered the public arena at an early stage, indicating its allure, transforming Jews (whose labels varied quite a bit at the time – *Israélites*, *Israeliti*, *Ebrei*, *Juden*, *Juifs*) into 'Semites' and transforming Judaism accordingly, alongside with Islam, into a 'Semitic religion'.

But there is more. As Michele Amari, an Italian patriot who spent some time of his life in exiled in Paris and authored a book on 'the Muslim of Sicily', claimed in 1873, Orientalists were deemed the vanguard of modern science. The study of oriental languages was well established in many state universities around Europe by this time, and it contributed to disclosing the treasures of different cultures and religions. Although Orientalists are engaged with a very wide array of cultures, inheriting the task of the missionaries who had started to decipher other cultures in the early modern period, their goals in the nineteenth century were aimed towards the translation of religious literature from the East, to dub Friedrich Max Mueller's endeavors.<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting to observe that as Leopold Zunz, one of the most important German Jewish scholars of his time and an architect of Reform Judaism,<sup>36</sup> laid the ground for a program to study Judaism in all its different manifestations (law, poetry, legends, ethics, rabbinics and so forth), others, like Ernest

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<sup>32</sup> The literature on the history of anti-Semitism is vast. Recent debate was enhanced by the publication of Nirenberg 2013.

<sup>33</sup> The debate over orientalism was launched by the book of Edward Said, 1978.

<sup>34</sup> For a good reconstruction, see Masuzawa 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Masuzawa 1993; Stone 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Veltri 2000; Trautmann-Waller 1998; Zwiep 2010.

Renan, would have claimed that Jews/Semites had produced no culture, art, poetry, or science at all, with the exception of the idea of monotheism.

Two parallel processes were taking place. One revolved around the transformation of Judaism within the different national states based on projects of historical reconstruction, which were meant to dig out the Jewish past in order to unearth its rich cultural tradition and prove the social reliability of Judaism. The other process was rooted in the emerging classification of religions that challenged the notion that the same process of social integration and recognition on equal basis could be applied in the attempt to orientalize and essentialize the religion of the Jews (Davidson Kalmar, Penslar 2004).

It will suffice to mention that some of the works of Ernest Renan attracted criticism and approval at the same time, and were accordingly debated and discussed among scholars and intellectuals of his time.<sup>37</sup>

## 5.1 The orientalization of the Jews

The ‘orientalization’ of the Jews followed two directions, one in *time* and one in *space*. Although it stemmed from outside, especially from non-Jewish intellectuals who were not necessarily anti-Semites, it was then appropriated by Jews, at an early stage, as in the case of the book *Autoemanzipation* by Leon Pinsker (Pinsker 1883), or the Italian positive interpretation of ‘Semitism’ of the above mentioned David Levi. Pinsker, a physician from Odessa who was educated in Germany, claimed in 1883 that Jews were indeed Semites and deserved their own land and state: a claim he made after the violent pogrom that had erupted in 1881. Levi’s praise of Semitism is something of a lost and incomprehensible world. In his *Il semitismo nella civiltà dei popoli* (Levi 1884), Levi offered a counter narrative to the rise of anti-semitism, defining ‘Semitism’ as Judaism, infused by principles of justice and freedom. For these intellectuals, Semites often coincided with ancient Jews, and deployed certain religious features, as they were conceived as bearers of ethical monotheism (Sofia 2006; Sofia 2011).

At the same time, others were inclined to define Jews as a foreign race, unable to merge with European civilization. Semitic religion, whilst being the cradle of monotheism, was perceived as violent, and ultimately unable to create art, science, or complex civilizations (Said 1978; Olender 1989). Whilst modern civilization adulated science and technology, it showed ambivalence towards religion. It praised both its death and its preservation. Therefore ‘ethical monothe-

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<sup>37</sup> Recent books on Renan: Priest 2015; Van Deth 2012.



ism', whose source was still biblical, attracted public and scholarly debate and nurtured conflict among biblical religions. The 'scramble for ethical monotheism' engendered competition and in the end the winner was reformed Christianity, which outlawed its Semitic kin (Jews and Muslim).

Space-wise, 'orientalization' was addressed to the Holy Land, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, where Hasidic Jews were a special target. Travel literature, drawings, and art provide ample evidence of the impact the Holy Land and North Africa had on the European imagination. Although they lived in different places, these Jews were slowly perceived as part of an immutable past that had survived among the moderns. Orientalization was also directed to the past, especially to Biblical Jews. The Holy Land as a place became a privileged point of departure for the understanding of the Bible, and in particular for the reconstruction of ancient Jewish religion and early Christianity. The improvement of travel infrastructures and the rise of tourism as a bourgeois practice went hand in hand with interest in the Orient. As intellectuals and missionaries traveled to the East, they gathered detailed information about indigenous peoples. Ethnographies (narratives) and objects were collected from different cultures and filled European museums and the collectible markets.

The Orient and the Holy Land were indeed places for religious experiences. Ethnographical reports, diaries and travelogues composed by Christians and Jews disclose not only scholarly endeavors but also religious feelings and emotional experiences. Feeling emotional ties from the place where a religion had originated, or from a religious place, was part of a modern religious experience. I shall provide a few examples, one by Ernest Renan and the other one by Isaac I. Goldziher, the Jewish founder of Islamic studies (*Islamwissenschaft*).

Renan traveled to Syria and Palestine in order to finalize his book on Jesus. Walking in Jesus' footsteps, and seeing and researching his places, provoked in Renan intense emotions: 'I could almost see and feel him as I saw his places', he confessed in his letters and notes (Priest 2015). A very similar reaction is detectable almost a century later in Pier Paolo Pasolini's documentary *Sopralluoghi in Palestina*, which was recorded before the preparation of his film *Gospel according to Matthew* which was eventually shot in South Italy instead (Pasolini 1963).

The great orientalist Ignaz Isaac Goldziher recorded in his *Tagebuch* a strong emotional experience that he experienced when entering a synagogue in Istanbul (Patai 1986). A reformer of Judaism, Goldziher had a complicated personality, and a critical attitude towards his fellow Jews, and Christian scholars. In 1876 he penned a book meant to criticize Renan's oversimplification of Jewish biblical religion, characterized by a lack of mythology (Goldziher 1876). His internal conflict with Orthodox Jewry derived from his conviction that Judaism was in need of reform, although his basis of comparison was not Christianity but Islam, a more

perfect form of monotheism. Goldziher traveled often to Cairo, but once, in Istanbul, he entered a synagogue during a sabbatical service and he burst into tears, overwhelmed by the religious atmosphere (Davidson Kalmar, Penslar 2005; Trautmann-Waller 2012). The story of Ignaz I. Goldziher is but just one of many about emotions and religious places.

Radical emotional experiences were eagerly sought after. They were often enhanced by places: synagogues, the Holy Land, or traveling among those Jews who were perceived as being archaic, and therefore more *authentic*. By the turn of the century, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the inner Orient of Judaism became a place to return to. Nostalgia for the past and for tradition, and sometimes the fear that this world would disappear as modern society advanced, fueled new interest in Hasidism. Their oral tradition was recorded and fictionalized. Ethnographic data were assembled, especially through the intense work of S. Ansky, a Jewish Russian ethnographer, and Martin Buber, the famous German Jewish philosopher (Buber 1928).

Jiří Langer (1894–1943) a Jewish author who befriended Franz Kafka in Prague and the son of a prosperous and assimilated Jewish family, recorded his religious experience among the Hasidic court of Belz in his book titled *Nine Gates to Hasidic Mysticism*. His escape into a radically different world, *das ganz Andere* as Rudolph Otto dubbed it in 1917, was not geographically far away from Prague. But the leap into the extreme ‘otherness’ of the Hasidic world was a leap into a mythical past, which eventually fueled personal metamorphosis. Langer never fully integrated in the world of Hasidism, and once he returned to his urban life, he embraced psychoanalysis and the exploration of Kabbalah and eros (Langer 1976; Otto 1917).

I shall conclude with a brief presentation of another author, who was a professional orientalist and who witnessed, in the words of Stefan Zweig, the end of ‘the world of yesterday’ (Zweig 1942).

Giorgio Levi della Vida was born into a prosperous Italian Jewish family that, as he underlined, had been secular for at least three generations (Levi della Vida 1966). As a young assimilated Jew, he was raised with ‘no religion’, to which he returned through science (Facchini 2014; Levi della Vida 1966). Levi became increasingly interested in religion while reading *La vie de Jesus* of Renan, which inspired him to become an orientalist. Although he was a professional scholar of Islam, he taught Hebrew for few years in Rome, and left some short, yet very dense, articles about ancient Judaism. In 1931 Levi left his Italian university after his refusal to swear an oath to the Fascist regime, and in 1938 he fled the country because of the anti-Semitic legislation implemented by Mussolini (Boatti 2001). On his way to America, where he would sojourn until the end of World War II, he stopped in Paris. Invited by Louis Massignon, he delivered a few lec-

tures at the *College de France*. His lectures followed in the footsteps of Renan's works on the Semites, which were delivered almost a century before (Facchini 2014). Without dismissing Renan's structure of reasoning, Levi della Vida praised the creativity of the Semites, Jews and Arabs. He not only highlighted the ethical religion the ancient Hebrews had given to humanity through the Prophets, but he also emphasized the God-idea that enhanced, among them, intense individual religious experiences and therefore the formation of the notion of *individual responsibility*. The dialectic between the collective and the individual is, according to him, the main feature of the religious creativity of the so-called 'Semites.' Levi della Vida was neither a poet nor an emotional scholar. Nevertheless his lectures bear some lyrical elements, as he confided that Semitic religions held a form of resilience, they owned an inner strength, which would enhance freedom. In 1938 that same message, although in a very different form, was delivered by Sigmund Freud, in his book *Der Mann Moses*, where among other things the Viennese psychologist highlighted the role of ethical monotheism as the great contribution Jews had made to Western civilization.<sup>38</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper I tried to demonstrate how representations of Judaism were interwoven into a social fabric that was dynamic and changed at a fast pace. While some Jews toiled to adapt Judaism to the modern world – opting for modern architecture, confronting social issues, opening membership to Gentiles, reforming liturgy, accepting women as religious leaders – images of archaism and tribalism were issued and circulated, given both the strength of prejudice and stereotypes, and the wide religious differences among diaspora Jews. Moreover, the search for a mythical past became increasingly embedded in the modern experience and took many forms, affecting especially younger generations who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, did not share the world they had inherited from their fathers.

Representations of religion were often the outcome on scholarly inquiry, but they were often transferred into the public arena, entering a process of cultural consumption. Religious narratives were therefore performed, and appropriated in order to fulfill religious and cultural needs. They traveled between continents, they were appropriated and misunderstood, they created communities, fueled hatred and nurtured hopes. The interactions of these elements contributed to mod-

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<sup>38</sup> Freud 1939; Yerushalmi 1993; Assmann 1998; Assmann 2009; Bori 1989.

ify lifestyles, including religious practices, and accordingly produced both a desire for modern life and *nostalgia* for a mythical past.

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