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Jewish–Christian Religiosity: A Study in Twentieth-Century Central European History

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The article explores the interaction of the German, Jewish, and Christian traditions in the first part of the twentieth century in Central Europe to show three cases, in which these traditions merge into one. I name the result of this interaction “Jewish–Christian religiosity.” The name conveys a desire, common to the cases discussed, to overcome the traditional distinctions between Jews and Germans and Jews and Christians. It also conveys the belief that spirituality could bridge the gap between people and promote a more open society for all. All three cases expand notions first conceived by Romantic and idealist thinkers in order to facilitate interest in arcane Jewish sources like the Kabbalah and Hasidism. As the article suggests, eclectic worldviews like those discussed here may appear unfamiliar, but they continue intellectual and cultural trends that were discussed in the literature before.

That Jews played a decisive role in shaping Central European, German-speaking culture is something of a truism. We know of numerous Jewish authors, critics, artists, filmmakers, and scholars who contributed to the creation of German culture, broadly understood, in the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth. And yet there seems to be one aspect, to which non-Jews and Jews seem to have always offered decisively distinct worldviews, namely spirituality. It may appear analytically certain that Central European German-speaking intellectuals of Christian belief or descent had different positions on issues pertaining to religious life, religiosity, and mysticism than their Jewish counterparts. This article, however, offers a different perspective. It shows that some Jewish intellectuals eschewed the assertion of difference and instead sought to prove that Judaism can contribute, and has contributed, to the creation of human spirituality. As we shall see, the Jewish intellectuals discussed here strove to present Judaism’s spiritual inheritance as on par with that of Christianity. Spirituality, they believed, linked rather than divided Jews and Christians.

This article discusses three case studies for Jewish spiritual contribution, namely Martin Buber’s Hasidic folktales (*Märchen*), Meir Wiener’s messianic expressionism, and Ernst Müller’s anthroposophical Kabbalah. The following will concentrate on Buber’s earliest compilation of Hasidic tales, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*

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(1906), and on his anthology of mystical texts from around the globe, *Ecstatic Confessions* (1909). These works offer a view into Buber's vision of spiritual equality that transcends Jewish and Christian particulars but takes something from both. It will then turn to Meir Wiener's 1920 volume of poetry *Messiahs*, which follows the lives of three tragic messianic figures, each of whom offers a meditation on the problems of spiritual renewal. As we shall see, Wiener dresses his complicated spiritual quest in the language of another German literary tradition, expressionism. Lastly, we will discuss Ernst Müller's 1932 translation of the *Zohar* (known also as the *Book of Zohar*), the principal work of medieval Kabbalism. This volume, an anthology of passages from the *Zohar*, reveals an extraordinary resemblance between the *Zohar*'s language and that of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy.

This article uses the term "German" as shorthand for "German-language Central European." It is mostly in this sense that the three protagonists of this essay are German. Buber, Wiener, and Müller came of age in the provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. All three experienced the multiethnic, multilingual, and multid denominational realities of Eastern Europe as a matter of fact.¹ This diversity is the essential backdrop to the creation of a Jewish-Christian religiosity. Furthermore, Buber, Wiener, and Müller came from rabbinic ancestry and were deeply influenced by their grandparents.² Galicia (where Buber and Wiener grew up) and Moravia (where Müller was born) were also home to some of the most established Jewish communities (largely Hasidic) of the time. All three men then moved to the big city of Vienna to study at one of the most prestigious academic institutions of their time. As we shall see, the works of Jewish-Christian religiosity discussed here bear the imprint of this trajectory, informed by traditional Judaism on the one hand, and academic knowledge, artistic sensitivity, and political awareness on the other.

The three examples discussed here serve as yet another demonstration of the profound changes Jewish life underwent in Central Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars have long described how Jews during this period began to abandon the practical aspects of Jewish life (the *Halakha*) and moved towards an idea of Judaism in Central Europe that was molded by Christian cultural and religious norms.³ Perhaps the most striking symbol of the

¹Despite its anachronism, some scholars suggest studying the Habsburg Empire as an ideal test case for the study of multiculturalism. See Johannes Feichtinger and Gary B. Cohen, eds., *Understanding Multiculturalism: The Habsburg Central European Experience* (New York, 2014).

²For more on biographical details about Martin Buber, Meir Wiener, and Ernst Müller see Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* (New Haven, 2019), esp. 1–15; Mikhail Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle: Expressionism, Marxism, and Yiddish Literature in the Life and Work of Meir Wiener* (Stanford, 2010), esp. 11–21; Ernst Müller, "Mein Weg durch Judentum und Christentum," *Judaica: Beiträge zum Verständnis des jüdischen Schicksals in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* 4/1 (1952), 223–43.

³Probably the most profound study of modern Jewish theological history is Max Wiener's *Jewish Religion in the Age of Emancipation*. First published 1933 in Berlin (and again in Hebrew in 1974), it is a cornerstone of Jewish scholarship and a key to understanding modern religious transformations. Wiener is acutely aware of how the Christian and civil milieu influenced Jewish religious trends. In his introduction, he gently but poignantly remarks that neither Reform nor Orthodox Judaism are free from outside influences: "When the Orthodoxy relinquished whatever was left of its authority in matters of civil affairs, or gave up the Jewish characteristic garb, then it broke the enclosing ring of the accepted order of life, just like liberalism did when it gave the religious service an aesthetic imprint, whose forms and standards were borrowed from

trend was the introduction of the organ, the quintessential Christian instrument, into synagogues. More than a mere symbol, the organ required also the construction of suitable houses of worship and the composition of special music, which had to be based in turn on the proper aesthetic ideas.⁴ The same period saw Jewish thinkers defend Judaism's coherence with the ethical demands of reason as stipulated by Immanuel Kant, an overtly Christian philosopher.⁵ And following in the footsteps of the German *Wissenschaft*, influential intellectuals started developing Jewish philology and historiography.⁶

The Christian context has led scholars to describe the relationship between non-Jewish and Jewish cultures using such terms as “dialectic,” “entanglement,” and “cultural transference.”⁷ While these terms communicate the complexity of cultural interaction, they also allow scholars to preserve German culture, Judaism, and Christianity as self-contained and independent spheres. They conceal the fact that ideologies can spill over the boundaries set by institutions to create more complex, less restricted worldviews. The following discussion is devoted to such worldviews. It seeks to go beyond the study of “entanglement” to explore other forms of Jewish-Christian interaction, where different traditions fuse.

the [non-Jewish] environment.” Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (Berlin, 1933), 5. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Two recent works make the case much more directly. In her 2011 book Leora Batnitzky argues that the category of religion became relevant to describe Judaism only when Jews relinquished self-governance and became “citizens” in nation-states. It is Mendelssohn, Batnitzky writes, who “invents the modern idea that Judaism is a religion.” Daniel Boyarin takes this insight one step further, claiming that the term “Judaism” is in fact a modern construction, created in the Christian environment of Central Europe. See Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, 2011), 13; Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick, 2019), esp. 130–48.

⁴Tina Frühauf, *The Organ and Its Music in German-Jewish Culture* (New York, 2009), esp. 27–88.

⁵The most famous example of which is neo-Kantian philosopher Herman Cohen's posthumously published magnum opus *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism* (*Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, 1919). Yet the claim appears already in Mendelssohn's religious philosophy. According to Freudenthal, “Mendelssohn advances one decisive argument for adhering to Judaism and the commandments in spite of universal reason and natural religion: the ceremonial law renders Judaism a safeguard against idolatry.” See Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame, 2012), 11.

⁶For more on the origin of nineteenth-century Jewish philosophy see George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides' Philosophy in 19th Century Germany: The Guide to Religious Reform* (Dordrecht, 2012). For more on the historical disciplines see Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Waltham, 1994); David N. Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York, 1995). For more on Jewish philology see Christian Wiese, *Wissenschaft des Judentums und Protestantische Theologie im Wilhelminischen Deutschland: Ein Schrei ins Leere?* (Tübingen, 1999).

⁷Examples are numerous and can be gleaned from the discussion at note 8 below. Some examples are worth pointing out. Mendes-Flohr discusses the “bifurcation,” “dialectics,” and “duality” of the German Jewish identity. Idel speaks of cultural “translations” and “transfers,” and HaCohen of entangled cultural traditions. See Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven, 1999); Moshe Idel, “Transfers of Categories: The German-Jewish Experience and Beyond,” in Steven E. Aschheim and Vivian Liska, eds., *The German-Jewish Experience Revisited* (Berlin, 2015), 15–44; Ruth HaCohen, “Between Noise and Harmony: The Oratorical Moment in the Musical Entanglements of Jews and Christians,” *Critical Inquiry* 32/2 (2006), 250–77.

The three intellectual projects discussed complicate the understanding of what scholars have termed “the post-assimilatory generation.”⁸ Members of this generation include men and women who came of age in the first quarter of the twentieth century and who sought to define their Jewishness against the assimilatory tendencies of their parents’ generation. According to this description, the line between the first and second generations of Jewish emancipation is drawn also along the problems of acculturation and assimilation. As with first- and second-generation immigrants, the members of the former group sought integration while the latter searched for self-definition and differentiation.⁹ Scholars have examined how the second generation’s turn to authenticity often involved the development of esoteric worldviews.¹⁰ Gershom Scholem is an obvious case in point. His Zionism, it is often suggested, was interwoven with his fascination with the Kabbalah.¹¹ But the views considered here complicate the historical picture. All three intellectuals were deeply invested in reviving the Jewish tradition, and at first glance seem to be textbook examples of post-assimilation. But their inquiry into the arcane sources of the Kabbalah and Hasidism aimed not only at differentiation and renewal but at acculturation and cultural synthesis as well. They created a basis for thinking about a combined Jewish and Christian religiosity. They did so knowingly, using well-established cultural forms for their purposes.

Judaism, Christianity, and German-language culture did not just influence each other; they also, at times, merged into greater, more complicated, and more capacious worldviews, encompassing elements from all three. These worldviews, importantly, cannot be considered as aberrations of a purer religion, philosophy, or culture. They developed in a context where nonorthodox spiritual systems of belief were common. It is for this reason that I suggest viewing the intellectual

⁸There is a vast literature on this moment in German Jewish history. See, for example, Shulamit Volkov, *Germans, Jews, and Antisemites: Trials in Emancipation* (Cambridge, 2006), 256–87; Shulamit Volkov, “Jüdische Assimilation und Eigenart im wilhelminischen Deutschland,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9 (1983), 331–48, 77–132; and Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, 1998), 1–35.

⁹For example, Brenner devotes his book on the “Jewish Renaissance” in Germany to “literary, artistic, and scholarly expressions ... schools and theaters, publishing houses, cultural associations, and clubs that consciously advanced a collective identity among German Jews, which differed from that of their non-Jewish surroundings.” Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture*, 5.

¹⁰German Jewish esotericism has received some scholarly attention and there is wide agreement as to its importance. Still, historians have yet to see how esotericism was rooted in its social context, and have thus far failed to recognize its Christian tendencies. For more on German Jewish esotericism see Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siecle Orientalism, the Ostjuden and the Aesthetics of the Jewish Self-Affirmation,” in Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, 1991), 77–132; Steven E. Aschheim, “German Jews beyond Bildung and Liberalism: The Radical Jewish Revival in the Weimar Republic,” in Aschheim, *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises* (Basingstoke, 1996), 31–44; Zohar Maor, *A New Secret Doctrine: Spirituality, Creativity, and Nationalism in the Prague Circle* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2010).

¹¹Most scholars seem to assume this intersection between Scholem’s Zionism and his Kabbalah studies as a given. See, for example, Amos Funkenstein, “Gershom Scholem: Charisma, ‘kairos’ and the Messianic Dialectic,” *History & Memory* 4/1 (1992), 123–40. I argue with this tendency in, for example, Amir Engel, “Reading Gershom Scholem in Context: Salomon Maimon’s and Gershom Scholem’s German Jewish Discourse on Jewish Mysticism,” *New German Critique* 121 (2014), 33–54.

projects discussed here as parts of twentieth-century German esotericism. It is also for this reason that I employ the term “religiosity”: the examples discussed here have more to do with subjective feelings than with institutions and organizations.¹²

Steiner’s anthroposophy, German expressionism, and the modern emergence of the folktale are obvious expressions of religiosity, but they cannot be understood in isolation. Not only are they firmly rooted in German cultural history, but they also constitute part of a widespread, turn-of-the-century cultural movement. In her book on German occultism, Corinna Treitel surveys the myriad forms taken by occultist teachings and practices, including astrology, graphology, parapsychology, magnetism, and mesmerism, as well as theosophy, anthroposophy, Arianism, and shamanism.¹³ Occultist teachings were widely consumed among the intellectual elites, the urban bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, and even rural farmers. “The sociological picture that emerges from this analysis,” Treitel writes, “suggests that the occult became the core of a mass movement in Central Europe not just because individual men and women found it efficacious but also because it adapted itself very quickly to the exigencies of modern consumer culture.”¹⁴ Historians still debate the contribution of occultist movements to the Nazis’ rise to power, but the general contours of Treitel’s argument are uncontested.¹⁵ Occultism, importantly, was immensely popular and influential within and beyond the borders of the German Reich.¹⁶

¹²The term “religiosity,” although somewhat underdeveloped still, refers mostly to the noninstitutional—that is, emotional and personal—aspects of spiritual practice. As Angel suggested, “From a conceptual point of view, religiosity is related to terms such as ‘spirituality,’ ‘piety,’ ‘devoutness,’ or even ‘godliness.’” See Hans Ferdinand Angel, “Religiosity,” in Anne L. C. Runeoh and Lluís Oviedo, eds., *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions* (Dordrecht, 2013), 2012–15.

¹³Despite its centrality, Treitel does not offer a stringent definition of “occultism”; it seems she employs the term in a manner synonymous with Wouter Hanegraaff’s “esotericism”; that is, as the “other” of scientific knowledge. For more see, for example, his *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, 2013), 13–14. Contemporary scholars often regard occultism as a highly modern esoteric trend, insofar as it encompasses attempts to reconcile religious spirituality with scientific worldviews. See, for example, Marco Pasi, “Occultism”, in Kocku von Stuckrad, ed., *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (first published online 2006), at doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1872-5287_bdr_COM_00321; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Occult/Occultism,” in Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden, 2006), 884–9.

¹⁴Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore, 2004), 57.

¹⁵Some scholars have argued that Germany might have checked the ascent of National Socialism had it not been for the powerful influence of “irrational,” “pseudo-scientific,” and “Romantic” cultural currents during World War II. The idea was promoted by several influential postwar intellectuals, but has also received more recent support. There have been relatively few attempts to unravel this connection or to study German occultism beyond its alleged contribution to Nazism, though one recent study has ventured to explore occultism in the postwar era. For more on German occultism and Nazism see Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From Wagner and the German Romantics to Hitler* (1941) (New Brunswick, 2004); Fritz Richard Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1961); George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, 1964); Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2001), based on lectures given in 1965; Walter Laqueur, *Weimar: A Cultural History, 1918–1933* (London, 1974); and Eric Kurlander, *Hitler’s Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich* (New Haven, 2017). On post-war occultism see Monica Black, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany* (New York, 2020).

¹⁶For more see, for example, John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, 2018); Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: The Secret History of How*

Buber, Wiener, and Müller grew up, lived, and worked in a cultural environment in which esoteric speculation and multiculturalism were normative. Each developed esoteric teachings and practices that fused elements from Jewish, German, and Christian traditions. By doing so, they created a new brand of speculation, one which cannot be described as merely influenced by Christian themes, nor as a properly Jewish undertaking. Rather, these were esoteric worldviews rooted in nineteenth-century German culture, which I have called, for lack of a better term, Jewish-Christian religiosity. Though the trend has received little attention to date, it may further our understanding of religion in the first half of the twentieth century. Its existence attests to the ability of lived religion to overcome fundamental philosophical and theological distinctions, including the one between Judaism and Christianity.

Martin Buber's folktales

Martin Buber (1878–1965) is regarded as one of the most influential and prolific Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century. His first anthology of Hasidic tales, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (1906), is a masterpiece of storytelling, comprising six folktales (translated, or rather retold, in German), four short introductory texts, and a compilation of aphorisms.¹⁷ The introductions convey the historical context with such remarkable language that Rabbi Nachman comes across not only as a historical figure but also as a mythical one. In 1909, Buber published *Ecstatic Confessions*,¹⁸ a global anthology of mystical texts featuring excerpts from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish sources, though most of its attention is devoted to the Catholic and Protestant traditions. The tacit argument that Buber makes with *Ecstatic Confessions* is even more radical than the one suggested by *Rabbi Nachman*. Not only does Judaism possess mystical, mythical, and folkish traditions, but also these traditions partake in the universal discourse of human spirituality. Both volumes were enthusiastically received.¹⁹

The two volumes belong in a thoroughly examined cultural context. Since the late eighteenth century, German intellectuals and writers developed notions like “folktale” (*Märchen*), “the mythical,” and “mysticism” in an effort to spiritualize or “reenchant” a world undergoing rapid social, political, and economic change.²⁰

Mysticism Shaped Our Nation (New York, 2009); Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, 2007).

¹⁷Originally published as *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* (Frankfurt am Main, 1906). English quoted from Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, trans. Maurice Friedman (Bloomington, 1956).

¹⁸There is evidence to suggest that Buber started to work on this compilation already in 1903. See David Groiser, “Einleitung,” in Martin Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, ed. David Groiser (Gütersloh, 2013), 19–23.

¹⁹For more on the reception of Buber's works on Hasidism see Mendes-Flohr, “Fin de Siecle Orientalism,” esp. 96–109. For more on the reception of *Ecstatic Confessions* see Groiser, “Einleitung,” 39–43.

²⁰The most famous among them being the German Romantics. The Romantic turn to myth, however, should be placed within the larger context of the growing acceptance in the Central European Protestant Church of the dictates of reason at the expense of the miraculous. For more see George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago, 2004), esp. 19–71. Other important works on the “return to myth” in German culture include Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago, 2000), 47–75; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003), 21–67. Scholars describe

Buber's volume of Hasidic tales knowingly participates in this discourse. With this work he implies that Jews share a set of spiritual concerns not dissimilar from those of Gentile society. They too are troubled by the rapid rise of industrialization and bourgeois society; they too feel that the grand promises of Enlightenment, formulated most succinctly by the slogans of the French Revolution, have failed to materialize. And they too sought solace in mystical, mythical, and folkish traditions.

Buber's rediscovery, or one might say invention, of the Jewish folktale and Jewish mysticism is typically described in the scholarship as part of an intra-Jewish debate surrounding the problems of Jewish cultural renewal. As mentioned above, many influential nineteenth-century Jewish intellectuals believed theirs to be a religion of reason and ethics, and the Kabbalah and Hasidism to be aberrations of Jewish history, the result of external influences, or the vestiges of a primitive past.²¹ Buber's turn to myth has therefore been understood as an attempt, influenced by currents in German Romanticism, to reinvigorate the Jewish spirit from within and to refute nineteenth-century Jewish skeptics. It has been coupled with his Zionist positions as well: Buber, it is suggested, hoped to harness myth in order to rekindle the spirit of a nation that had dwindled in its exilic existence.²² His early Hasidism is described as the manifestation of a cultural revolution pitting the scholars of the nineteenth century against the intellectuals of the twentieth. Whereas the former group, influenced by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, emphasized ethics and acculturation, the latter group aspired, in the manner of the German Romantics, to rejuvenate Judaism in both its spiritual and national character.

While this formulation is important, it often overlooks the wider Jewish-Christian context. For nearly two millennia, Christians cast Judaism as the religion of the flesh and the law in contrast to the religion of spirituality and love. This portrayal dates back to Paul's epistles and became a fundamental tenet of the Western episteme. As David Nirenberg explains, the Christian understanding of Judaism as materialism "helped to transform thinking about Judaism into a way of thinking about the world."²³ Buber's *Rabbi Nachman* and *Ecstatic Confessions* take a polemic stance against this very understanding, speaking as they do from the vantage point

the resurgence of the folktale in German modern culture in very similar terms. See, for example, Jack Zipes, "The Revolutionary Rise of the Romantic Fairy Tale in Germany," *Studies in Romanticism* 16/4 (1977), 409–50. The similarities nonetheless obfuscate the many differences between myths, folktales, legends, and other forms of traditional story. For more on these distinctions see, for example, Max Lüthi, *Märchen*, ed. Heinz Rölleke, 10th updated edn (Stuttgart, 2004), 1–15.

²¹"With ease one can locate formulations that call Kabbalah a 'treacherous fabrication' (Steinschneider), an 'absurdity' (Geiger), 'superstition and the service of spirits' (Zunz), a 'weird brainchild of the Middle Ages, shaped by petty quipping' (Stern), 'degeneracy of Judaism' (Jost), and many such more." George Y. Kohler, *Kabbalah Research in the Wissenschaft des Judentums 1820–1880* (Oldenbourg, 2019), 6.

²²There is a wealth of literature on Buber's project of Jewish renewal. Urban offers the most recent and possibly most comprehensive study to date on the context and significance of Buber's Hasidism. See Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik* (Chicago, 2009). This work construes Buber's work both as part of an intra-Jewish debate and as it pertains to, among other things, the "critique of language, historicism, Orientalism, Jewish aniconism ... aesthetic representation, cultural memory, intertextuality, and reader-reception theory." *Ibid.*, 5. Still, it too mostly ignores the Christian-Jewish polemics as described here.

²³David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York, 2013), 53, argues for the decisive importance of the Christian understanding of Judaism already in its title.

of universal spirituality, and refusing to distinguish between religious law and spiritual faith. Buber's outlook sees human history as a tale of evolving spiritual traditions, more similar to each other than distinct. It is a patently esoteric worldview, operating beyond what institutional theologians and academics usually call theology. Nevertheless, the social implications are likewise far-reaching: nations are no longer separated according to their spiritual quality, but rather share in the light of the divine presence, whatever its exact historical form may have been.

Buber creates his Jewish-Christian religiosity by weaving together folktales of Rabbi Nachman into one composed by himself. In his aesthetic appraisal of the folktale, Max Lüthi observes how folktales, with their characteristic lack of ambivalence and satisfying vindication of good against evil, elide the deeper and more complex aspects of human experience. He proposes that such "emptying (*Entleerung*) also means sublimation. All elements [of the folktale] become pure, light, and transparent and join in an effortless interplay all the important themes of human existence."²⁴ Lüthi's description illuminates how not only *Nachman's* stories but also their introductions serve as folktales, insofar as they empty out the complexity of the historical circumstances in favor of a sense of the sublime.

The first introductory section of *Rabbi Nachman*, titled "Jewish Mysticism," is considered by some scholars to be the earliest historical account of the Jewish mystical condition.²⁵ This is probably not the case, and at any rate the historical debate obscures the section's aesthetic qualities. It indeed purports to offer a brief account of the history of Jewish mysticism, but what appear at first glance to be factual statements quickly become something else. In the opening line, for example, Buber writes, "Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, who was born in 1772 and died 1810, is perhaps the last Jewish mystic. He stands at the end of an unbroken tradition, whose beginning we do not know."²⁶ These opening lines brilliantly blur the facts, transforming them into a fantastic myth of origin. The same device can be observed throughout. In the third paragraph, for instance, Buber describes the history of the reception of mystical knowledge:

We can, of course, no longer look on it as its old masters and disciples did: as "Kabbala" [*sic*], that is, as transmission, from mouth to ear and again from mouth to ear in such a way that each generation receives it, yet each with a broader and richer interpretation until at the end of time the entire truth has been made known.²⁷

It is with remarkable lightness that Buber disposes of the thorny issues of reception and of the differences between his modern audience and the "old masters." Following Lüthi, however, it can be argued that what the text loses in complexity

²⁴Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. John D. Niles (Bloomington, 1986), 73.

²⁵See Ron Margolin, *Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in early Hasidism* (Jerusalem, 2005), 8; Boaz Huss, "Martin Buber's Introduction to the Stories of Rabbi Nachman and the Genealogy of Jewish Mysticism" (Hebrew), in Uri Ehrlich, Howard Kreisel, and Daniel Lasker, eds., *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought, Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein* (Be'er Sheva, 2008), 97–121.

²⁶Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, 3.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 3.

it gains in sublimation. Buber uses the term “Kabbala” to transform an apparently factual discussion into a little tale (*Märchen*) about ears and mouths that turn upwards towards a hopeful and even utopic horizon. For those who missed this nuanced indication, Buber makes the point also explicitly, claiming that “Hasidism is the Kabbala become ethos.”²⁸

Buber employs the same strategy (emptying and sublimation) in his account of Rabbi Nachman’s life, in a section he titled “Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav.” In this telling, the historical Rabbi Nachman was a mythical figure, living on the fault line between this world and the next. He fought a heroic and doomed battle to preserve the spiritual teachings of Hasidism, which threatened to be quashed by the powers of modernity. The opening of the section sets up this history as a chapter within a universal struggle: “The period of the beginning of the degeneration of Hasidism is a profoundly tragic one. There arose men who saw the decline come and wanted to halt it, but were not able to.” It seems as though the very idea of Hasidism had degenerated. Nachman’s solution, according to Buber, was a mystical one: he “certainly recognized the perversion of the institution of the zaddik (the Hasidic sage), yet wanted not to annihilate it but to heal it, demanding in place of the empty and deceitful wonder-maker, the dedicated mediator living in devotion.”²⁹ That is, the zaddik would serve as a mediator of spiritual energy and reinforce man’s connection with heaven. Once again, what seems at first to be historiography evolves into mystical musings.

Buber believes that Hasidism is a mystical teaching akin to those of the medieval nuns and monks. It is from this position that he develops an esoteric worldview undermining the epistemic division between spiritual Christianity and material Judaism, putting them both in line with many other similar traditions. He makes this point in *Ecstatic Confessions* by presenting a universal scheme of spiritual equality. Reflecting on his position, he writes,

The voice of the human being; I have forgotten about degrees, the hierarchy of minds. There are the lofty Plotinus and Attar, the boldest of the poets; there is Valentinus, the secret daimon of the turn of an era, and Ramakrishna, through whom the whole being of India was made manifest once more in our day; there is Symon the Byzantine friend and singer of God, and Gerlach Peters his brother in the Netherlands, young and filled with the joy of dying; and there besides them are the shepherdess Alpais of Cudot ... and the wild farm-wench Armelle Nicolas; there is Camisards ... there are those simple-hearted lovesick nuns ... There they are together side by side in the fellowship of those who dare to tell of that abyss. I live with them; I hear their voices: their voice of a human being.³⁰

There is much to unpack in Buber’s tribute to human–spiritual equality.³¹ Not least is his ability to turn even a list into a little tale of pure spirituality; that is, into a

²⁸Ibid., 10.

²⁹Ibid., 19.

³⁰Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, trans. Esther Cameron (San Francisco, 1985), xxxii.

³¹For more this volume’s impact see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Martin Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, trans. Esther Cameron (San Francisco, 1996), xix–xx.

Märchen. As in his introduction to *Rabbi Nachman*, the factual transforms into a spiritual vision of an open and free world, which now has also room for a German Jewish–Christian utopia.

Buber's vision of Jewish–Christian religiosity is consistent with some of his other, more famous, areas of concern, namely with his views of Zionism and his later dialogical philosophy. It is impossible to exhaust the discussion of either of these two issues. It must therefore suffice to draw attention to the fact that both Buber's Zionism and his dialogical philosophy are intensely spiritual endeavors. As in the German Jewish–Christian religiosity described above, both his Zionism and his dialogical undertaking, the truth is interior and spiritual. And similar to the case discussed here, this truth connects people, in a profound way, whatever their circumstances or background.

Nowhere does Buber proclaim the spiritual quality of the Zionist project more powerfully than in his lecture "Judaism and the Jews," later published in the small and extremely influential volume entitled *Three Speeches on Judaism* (1911). It opens with the fundamental question inherent to a Jewish secular modern society, namely, what connects modern secular Jews to Judaism. Jewish individuals, Buber claimed, had very little in common. They did not live in the same land, speak the same tongue, practice or believe in the same things. Jews and Judaism, he thus intimated, seem to be at a dead end. For Buber, the solution to this existential problem lay in community, understood in a mystical–spiritual sense. Rather than taking up a petrified religion or fighting for an imagined nation, Buber follows Gustav Landauer, suggesting that Jews should take the path inward.³² The path to Judaism was, in other words, a voyage into one's own self. There, Buber claims, in the interiority of each and every individual, lies the root of the Jewish community, free from any concrete obligation or restriction. As described here, Buber's Zionism may appear similar to other *völkisch* nationalist positions that were present at the same time and place. This affinity has been an issue of some controversy among scholars,³³ to which the current analysis has little to contribute. Still, it should be clear that the universal spirituality Buber developed – the topic of the discussion here – is antithetical to an exclusivist national position.

There are reasons to distinguish between the models of spiritual communication described thus far and Buber's dialogical model developed in his monumental work *I and Thou* (1923). For one thing, the scale seems very different. In Buber's earlier work on Hasidism, discussed above, religions and traditions meet. In his lectures on Zionism, the individual gains access to a "community." The dialogical imagination is intimate. It is literally about the Thou, which I experience directly as a revelation. And yet, the fact of spiritual or even mystical meeting remains. Scholars, therefore, debate the nature of the relationship between Buber's early work (on Hasidism) and his later work (dialogue). Some draw distinctions whereas others underscore the

³²Yossef Schwartz, "Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer: The Politicization of the Mystical," in Michael Zank, ed., *Martin Buber: Neue Perspektiven/New Perspectives* (Tübingen, 2006), 205–19; Michael Löwy, "Utopia and Revolution: The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber," in Elena Namlı, Jayne Svenungsson, and Alana M. Vincent, eds., *Jewish Thought, Utopia, and Revolution* (Amsterdam, 2014), 49–64.

³³A recent perspective on this debate can be found in Yemima Hadad, "Hasidic Myth-Activism: Martin Buber's Theopolitical Revision of Volkish Nationalism," *Religions* 10/2 (2019) 96, at <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020096>.

similarities.³⁴ For the sake of the discussion here, it seems to me to be highly significant that Buber's work, including his later dialogical texts, were enthusiastically received by Christian readers who saw in it, among other things, a model for inter-religious dialogue.³⁵ Buber's dialogical philosophy, his Zionism, and his Hasidic tales all explore the conditions of profound meeting, even between agents that appear immensely different.

Meir Wiener's symbolic expressionism

It is difficult to overstate Buber's influence among the younger generation of German Jews, many of whom regarded his discovery of Jewish spirituality as epochal.³⁶ Meir Wiener was one of these young admirers, and his life story falls squarely into the mold of the so-called post-assimilatory generation.³⁷ Born 1893 in Krakow, he moved as a young adult to Vienna, and with the outbreak of World War I left to study philosophy in Zurich and Berlin. There he moved in circles of the literary avant-garde and cultural Zionism. In the 1920s he turned to communism and Yiddish literature, moving in 1926 to the Soviet Union, where he headed the Literature and Folklore Department at the Institute of Jewish Proletarian Culture in Kiev. The war in summer 1941 forced him to flee eastward, and in the winter of that year he joined the so-called Writer's Battalion of the Red Army. He went missing in action during the bloody battle of Wjasma, three months after enlisting, at the age of forty-seven.³⁸

During the 1910s and 1920s, Wiener wrote and published some of the strangest and most daring works of Jewish-Christian religiosity.³⁹ While Buber used the folk-tale to express his universal vision of spirituality, Wiener wrote in a symbolic and expressionist mode. I discuss Wiener's concept of the "Symbol" elsewhere;⁴⁰ here it is important only to know that it shares some basic intuitions with the "Idea" of

³⁴In his seminal work *From Mysticism to Dialogue*, Paul Mendes Flohr posits a clear distinction between the early literary works and later philosophical concerns. Other scholars are less convinced. See Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit, 1989); Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Problem of Unity in the Thought of Martin Buber," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27/3 (1989), 423–44; Israel Koren, *The Mystery of the Earth: Mysticism and Hasidism in the Thought of Martin Buber* (Leiden, 2010).

³⁵Christian theologians were deeply taken by Buber and many have written on his work. For a recent perspective see W. Clark Gilpin, "'Companionable Being': American Theologians Engage Martin Buber," in Sam Berrin Shonkoff, ed., *Martin Buber: His Intellectual and Scholarly Legacy* (Leiden, 2018), 54–65. For a Catholic perspective on Buber see, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Einsame Zwiesprache: Martin Buber und das Christentum* (Cologne, 1958).

³⁶See Christian Wiese, "Zwischen Verehrung und Entzauberung: Hans Kohns, Robert Weltschs und Hugo Bergmanns Wahrnehmung Martin Bubers im Spiegel ihrer Korrespondenz," *Naharaim* 7/1–2 (2013), 171–201; Chaim Schatzker, "Martin Buber's Influence on the Jewish Youth Movement in Germany," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 23/1 (1978), 151–72.

³⁷See note 8 above.

³⁸The official missing-in-action document can be viewed at <https://bit.ly/2LW9GMq>.

³⁹In his biographical study of Wiener, Krutikov devotes a chapter to this period in Wiener's life. The chapter's title, "Failed Messiahs: German-Jewish Culture," alludes also to Martin Buber. See Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle*, 11–53.

⁴⁰Amir Engel, "German-Jewish Esotericism: The Case of Meir Wiener's Expressionist Kabbalah," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 65/1 (2020), 36–51.

expressionist poetry.⁴¹ Both have deep roots in the German literary tradition, both seek a path through which spirituality can flow, and both hope to transcend what is commonly called literature in order to intervene in history and transform humanity.⁴² As for Wiener's position on Jewish-Christian relations, it diverges sharply from Buber's inclusive universality of human spirit. Wiener distinguishes between Judaism and Christianity and between the "Orient" and "Occident," portraying the Christian West as spiritually inferior. Though there is nothing particularly Jewish about his writings, they do present oriental spirituality, and by extension Jewish spirituality, as a model for Christianity to follow.

Scholars have long recognized that German expressionist literature and art contain a strong spiritual-revolutionary impulse. In his much-discussed 1916 volume *Expressionism*, Hermann Bahr compares the expressionist artists to two contemporary influential esoteric thinkers, Rudolf Steiner and Martin Buber.⁴³ The scholarly literature, while somewhat reticent to explore this aspect of expressionism,⁴⁴ has nevertheless laid the groundwork for understanding it as an esoteric undertaking. Thomas Anz's study *Literary Expressionism* hints at the movement's esoteric tendencies with such section titles as "The New Human: End of the World, Transformation, and Utopia"; "Life"; "Spirit"; and "Masses and Human: Alienation and Community."⁴⁵ Another important term in Anz's discussion is "Action." Literary expressionism, he argues, concerns itself with the effort to build a new world order through a community of spiritually transformed human beings. Lisa Marie Anderson takes this insight one step further by claiming that "diverse though the Expressionists' projections of the future were, they generally shared both a visionary quality and an orientation toward some momentous rupture in the continuum of experience."⁴⁶ Wiener would probably have agreed.

The small volume *Messiahs*, published in 1920, is dedicated "with reverence" to Martin Buber.⁴⁷ It contains three long poems, each focused on a contentious figure from Jewish history: Diogo Pires, Herod the Great, and Joseph della Reina. Pires, better known as Shlomo Molcho, was born in 1500 to a Marrano family, converted to Judaism, and in 1532 was burned at the stake after a short but impassioned career of prophesying the end of Jewish exile, especially in Italy. The poem describes his voyages, discussions, and dreams, but offers the reader little on his life's

⁴¹The Symbol referred to here was invented by the German Romantics. Halmi explains that it was "supposed to be at once infinitely meaningful and incapable of being reduced to any particular meaning. And as such, it allows us to experience what is essentially beyond." Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (New York, 2008), 2.

⁴²In his essay on the literary tradition from German Romanticism to expressionism, Morgan writes that "a familiar tradition since the eighteenth century has invested art with the power to heal a decadent human condition." David Morgan, "The Enchantment of Art: Abstraction and Empathy from German Romanticism to Expressionism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57/2 (1996), 317–41, at 317.

⁴³Hermann Bahr, *Expressionismus* (Munich, 1916), 45–46.

⁴⁴For a helpful summary of the scholarship on the religious tendencies in expressionism see Kristin Eichhorn and Johannes S. Lorenzen, "Editorial," *Expressionismus: Religion*, March 2016, 7–10. In my view, this scholarly avenue is limited by a narrow and overly specific understanding of the term "religious."

⁴⁵See the table of contents of Thomas Anz's *Literatur des Expressionismus* (Stuttgart, 2010), ix–x.

⁴⁶Lisa Marie Anderson, *German Expressionism and the Messianism of a Generation* (Amsterdam, 2011), 15.

⁴⁷Meir Wiener, *Messias: Drei Dichtungen* (Vienna, 1920), 3.

dramatic trajectory or his thinking. Herod was the Roman-installed king of Judea and renovator of the Second Temple. The poem reimagines the confrontation recorded in the Talmud between Herod and the sage Baba ben Buta, who advised the king to rebuild the Temple as atonement for his sins. Wiener expounds on matters of shame and guilt, but again offers little on the characters or their historical context. Joseph della Reina was a fifteenth-century Jewish mystic who according to legend nearly captured Samael (Satan) and redeemed the world of evil. Wiener's poem describes his famous attempt but pays more attention to its aftermath.

Messiahs is a confusing work. The poems almost completely ignore basic questions about the action and the characters, including who they were, how and why they acted, or what actually happened, in favor of exploring emotional terrain. The striking emotional register of Wiener's poetry, though not unusual for expressionist literature,⁴⁸ seems in this case to serve a special function. It consistently reminds the reader that Jews are capable of spiritual intensity. More important, it invokes a higher plane of experience, one existing beyond the standard distinctions of life and death, good and evil, natural and artificial, and Jewish and Christian. The first section of "Diogo Pires" is a case in point:

A small boat dances on wild waves
 Childishly overconfident, it risks shouting joyously along with the roar
 To jump together in the wild dance-game.
 There the monsters arrogantly blast
 The unlucky boat onto the shore cliff
 And the overconfident one shatters into a thousand splinters.
 The waves, however, crash on the cliffs with mocking wail,
 Screaming, foam churns up
 They spatter into billions of drops.
 The dying boat cries in death's terror:
 It cannot endure the Godly mighty-joy of the crashing waves.

Man neither.
 His soul flees in dying rapture a thousand times.
 Shaken by the breaks
 The giant transforms into a pile of bone splinters.
 Yet the human-worm shouts arrogantly:
 God! To hear you and to shatter to splinters!

[Ein kleiner Nachen tanzt auf tobenden Wellen,
 kindlich vermessen wagt er ihr Brausen mitzujuchzen
 im wilden Tanzspiel mitzuspringen.
 Da schmettern die Ungeheuer in Übermut
 Den Unseligen an den Uferfels—
 Und der Vermessene zerschellt in tausend Splitter.

⁴⁸Anz notes that the term "expressionism" is often understood to mean "strong feelings." See Anz, *Literatur des Expressionismus*, 162.

Die Wellen aber bersten an der Klippe mit höhndem Geheul,
 Schreiend, Gischt aufschäumend
 Spritzen sie auf in Milliarden Tropfen.
 Da weint der sterbende Nachen in Todesgrauen:
 Er kann die gottstarke Freude der brandenden Wellen nicht erleiden.

Auch nicht der Mensch.
 Im strebenden Entzücken entflieht seine Seele tausendmal.
 Geschüttelt auf den Wogen
 Wandelt sich der Riese in einen Haufen Knochensplitter.
 Und doch schreit der Menschenwurm vermessen:
 Gott! Dich hören und in Splitter zerschellen!]⁴⁹

The allegory described in this excerpt characterizes the entire volume. Here it compares a little boat, dancing on the waves by a rocky shore, to human life. Both are joyous and overconfident, and both are destined to die a terrible death, itself depicted as joyous. It appears that living a fulfilled life, in the deepest sense, justifies even death. The last line cements this with an ecstatic prayer: “God! To hear you and to shatter to splinters!”

The poem does not simply preach an extreme existentialism: it seeks to re-create it as an experience for the reader. This is how the emotional intensity of the poems and their preoccupation with life and death, shame and pride, and honor and disgrace should be interpreted. The lives and deeds of Pires, Herod, and della Reina are not important; the goal is to offer a palpable vision of the fulfilled life, to make the reader feel the encounter with God in all its exhilaration and dread. Wiener’s poems discuss life and death not to communicate their meaning but to evoke transcendence, the experience rather than the event of messianism.

The poems’ emotional register repeatedly overwhelms mundane distinctions. The above excerpt from “Diogo Pires” jolts between the opposing themes of life and death, nature and humanity, bravery and stupidity, and horror and joy, to the point where the oppositions become inconsequential. Other dichotomies treated in the book, including humility and arrogance, shame and pride, guilt and virtue, and above all Judaism and Christianity—are likewise imbued with such heightened emotion that their differences dissolve.

The synthesis of the two religions is expressed from the very first poem, which Wiener chooses to write on Pires, an embodiment of Jewish–Christian relations. Pires, whom Wiener refers to by his Christian name rather than by Shlomo Molcho, as he is usually known, “was born in 1500 as a Marrano in Spain and condemned to death on the order of Charles V, whom he tried to convert to Judaism.” What most interests Wiener is the creation process of a Christian Jew, not the outcome of his actions. And indeed, the possibility of looking beyond the Jewish–Christian divide is raised in the poem’s final section. It features a description of one of Pires’s visions which sees Jesus return to the bosom of Judaism. In the vision the Gentile nations taunt Jesus on the cross, laugh at him, call him “Jew” and “dummy” (*Popanz*), and demand that he leave. They say, “Hideous contorted

⁴⁹Wiener, *Messias*, 9–10. I thank Gideon Freudenthal for his help with the translation.

Man, what are you doing in our midst?”⁵⁰ They relieve him from the cross and watch as he retreats in shame and agony, carrying his cross under his arm. On the road, Jesus meets a group of downtrodden wanderers, who proceed to cast his cross away, clean the hardened blood from his wounds, and remove his crown of thorns. They then adorn him with phylacteries on his forehead and arm. The nations who observe this simply shrug their shoulders and turn away.

In his short discussion of the poem, Krutikov writes that this episode symbolizes the realization that the “Western world” has nothing more in common with “the Jewish man who preached humility and submissiveness.”⁵¹ This interpretation is perceptive. Wiener differentiates between the nations who have lost interest in truth and spirituality, and Judaism, which still carries a message of observance and humility. But there is more to be said here. First, very similar ideas were propagated by some of the most influential German Jewish intellectuals, including Abraham Geiger and Hermann Cohen.⁵² Second, this idea should not be understood as a Jewish chauvinist one. Rather, the claim for the ethical or spiritual primacy of Judaism is also a demand for equal rights in a pluralistic society. Judaism, in Wiener’s depiction, is not better than Christianity; it is the real Christianity. It is the religion of love and humility, of the downtrodden, and of spirituality. In other words, the entire terminology that was so often used to distinguish Christianity is here used to define Judaism. It is no wonder that even Jesus finds his place among the Jews. Here, in short, the distinction between Judaism and Christianity, so central to the Western psyche, is no more attainable.

Ernst Müller’s anthroposophical *Zohar*

If one system of esoteric thought stands out among those discussed so far, it is that of Kabbalah scholar, Zionist, and advocate of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy Ernst Müller. Anthroposophy does not imagine, like Buber’s folktales, a return to a primeval spirituality, nor does it seek to facilitate a heightened emotional experience like Wiener’s poetry. It is instead built into the life of the bourgeoisie, endowing everyday practices—gardening, playing music, rearing children—with special, otherworldly significance.⁵³ Put differently, it does not entail changing how the bourgeoisie lives but only transforming how this life is understood, radicalizing its very meaning. And it is all but completely divorced from the institutions of organized religion, most importantly from the church. Perhaps for these reasons,

⁵⁰Ibid., 27–28.

⁵¹Krutikov, *From Kabbalah to Class Struggle*, 47.

⁵²The idea that Jesus should be counted among the Jews was propagated by several influential German Jewish intellectuals. According to Abraham Geiger, for example, Jesus’ teaching was not innovative but represents currents that existed among Jewish schools of his time. Jesus’ teachings, put bluntly, were Jewish. Herman Cohen thought that because of its central role in the Christian teaching, Judaism was formative to the creation of German culture. See Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago, 1998), esp. 50–75; George Y. Kohler, “Hermann Cohen und die Aufhebung der christlichen Alleinherrschaft in der Kultur,” in Eveline Goodman-Thau and George Y. Kohler, eds., *Nationalismus und Religion: Hermann Cohen zum 100. Todestag* (Heidelberg, 2019), 61–73.

⁵³One selection of Steiner’s, published as *From Beetroot to Buddha ...: Answers to Questions* (London, 1999) wonderfully captures his entire *oeuvre*.

anthroposophy, in contrast to the other systems, still exerts influence today, and does so on a global scale.⁵⁴

These features were also what made anthroposophy so compelling to Jewish intellectuals like Ernst Müller.⁵⁵ Müller was born in 1880 to educated German-speaking Jewish parents in a small town in Moravia. An accomplished student, he attended the University of Vienna, where he came into contact with Zionist circles and started writing for the Zionist newspaper *Die Welt*. There he became acquainted with Martin Buber, Samuel Hugo Bergmann, Theodor Herzl, and Max Nordau. He immigrated to Palestine in 1907,⁵⁶ but soon contracted malaria and returned to Vienna. Back in Europe he reengaged himself with Zionist causes, but the turning point in his life came in 1910, when he heard Rudolf Steiner lecture and subsequently had a private audience with him. Throughout the rest of his life he moved between Zionist circles and the Anthroposophical Society. In 1938 he fled Vienna, first to the global hub of the anthroposophical movement in Dornach, Switzerland, and later to London, where he died in 1954.⁵⁷

Müller's work on the Kabbalah attempts to demonstrate the deep interrelation of Judaism and anthroposophy. This dual engagement is evident from the first page of *The Zohar and Its Teachings (Der Sohar und seine Lehre)*, his small but rich 1920 introductory volume to the principal work of medieval Kabbalism, the *Zohar*.⁵⁸ In the short foreword Müller writes, "With thankful heart, I name especially *Rudolf Steiner*, who was the first to introduce me to the universal occult science [*weltumfassender okkulter Wissenschaft*], and *Martin Buber*, who pointed me in the

⁵⁴Zander surveys anthroposophy's global reach in his encyclopedic overview. See Helmut Zander, *Die Anthroposophie: Rudolf Steiners Ideen zwischen Esoterik, Weleda, Demeter und Waldorfpädagogik* (Paderborn, 2019).

⁵⁵A more serious consideration of Steiner's Jewish students is still a desideratum. Ansgar Martins has offered some initial observations, including a discussion of Müller's life in an appendix to Hans Büchenbacher's memoirs. Büchenbacher was the Jewish chairman of the anthroposophical society in Germany when Hitler came to power. For more see Hans Büchenbacher, *Hans Büchenbacher: Erinnerungen 1933–1949*, ed. Ansgar Martins (Frankfurt am Main, 2014), esp. 386–90.

⁵⁶Müller described his experiences in Palestine in, for example, Ernst Müller, "Galiläa: ... Reiseindrücke," *Die Welt*, 7 Sept. 1909, 609–13.

⁵⁷Müller's short biographical essay has an extraordinary title and was published in a rather unique venue. See Ernst Müller, "Mein Weg durch Judentum und Christentum," *Judaica: Beiträge zum Verständnis des jüdischen Schicksals in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* 4/1 (1952), 223–43. The essay deserves more attention than it has received, although the vast majority of literature on Müller concerns his unique life story. Hans-Jürgen Bracker, a Waldorf teacher and independent scholar, has been pivotal in promoting the study of Müller's life and work, writing about him in the *Novalis* anthroposophical journal as early as 1994 and maintaining a Facebook page under Müller's name. See Hans-Juergen Bracker, "Ernst Müller: Portrait eines Mitteleuropäers," *NOVALIS* 2/3 (1994), 16–20; and facebook.com/ernstmichaelmueller. Two articles that mention Müller appear in a 2009 volume entitled *Anthroposophie und Judentum*. Hans-Juergen Bracker, "Humanistischer Zionismus: Hugo Bergmann, Ernst Mueller und der Palaestina-Konflikt," in Ralf Sonneberg, eds., *Anthroposophie und Judentum: Perspektiven Einer Beziehung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), 81–9; Nathanael Riemer, "Wanderer zwischen den Welten: Der Kabbalist und Anthroposoph Ernst Müller. Eine Spurensuche," in Ralf Sonnenberg, ed., *Anthroposophie und Judentum: Perspektiven einer Beziehung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), 91–101. On Müller and his work see also Andreas Kilcher, "Kabbalah and Anthroposophy: A Spiritual Alliance According to Ernst Müller," in Boaz Huss and Julie Chajes, eds., *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions* (Beer-Shava, 2016), 197–222.

⁵⁸Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar und seine Lehre: Einleitung in die Gedankenwelt der Kabbalah* (Vienna, 1920).

direction of a hidden living heartbeat of subterranean spiritual Judaism.”⁵⁹ Buber’s Jewish and Zionist esotericism contributed as much to Müller’s reconceptualization of the *Zohar* as it did to his reorientation toward Steiner’s anthroposophy.

Anthroposophy, broadly speaking, is a method for developing vision in both the material and extra-material sense. It may thus be said that anthroposophy sees the goal of human life in developing the perception of the spiritual world to overlap with the physical one. According to Helmut Zander, “Steiner understood anthropology as the study of humans’ physical constitution, and theosophy as the conception of its ‘spiritual’ dimension. Anthroposophy is the intermediary perspective between scientific empiricism and the ‘theosophical’ ‘overview.’”⁶⁰ Human beings only achieve their full existence when they grasp the cosmos in its material–spiritual entirety, a combination of scientific and theosophical points of view. Steiner’s anthroposophy offered individuals access to this privileged viewpoint.

To understand Steiner’s method, it is necessary to see that it is deeply rooted in nineteenth-century German philosophy as well as in Christian tradition, especially Christology.⁶¹ Steiner’s push for a way humans might observe both physical and non-physical reality belongs to the German idealist tradition since Kant. One of Kant’s central philosophical challenges was bridging the gap between realism and idealism—the rival propositions that things are “really out there,” or that they owe their existence to and are imagined by the human spirit. Kant’s solution famously involves the distinction between the “thing in itself,” which exists in the world, and impressions created by the senses; their combination is responsible for producing reality. Yet the solution left many thinkers of the nineteenth century wanting. The German idealists continued to search for the “true” world, existing beyond the simple dichotomies of physical and imaginary, material and spiritual, and objective and subjective. The influence of their monism is immediately apparent in Steiner’s thinking.⁶²

It is Müller’s belief that the anthroposophical idea, according to which every individual may acquire spiritual–material awareness, can be found in the Kabbalist tradition as well, especially in the *Zohar*. He conveys this in *The Zohar and Its Teachings*, as well as in his German anthology of selections from Zoharic literature, *The Zohar: The Holy Book of the Kabbalah (Der Sohar: Das heilige Buch der Kabbalah)*.⁶³ Both works are remarkable for their erudition and clarity.⁶⁴

⁵⁹Ibid., 3, emphasis in the original.

⁶⁰Helmut Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884–1945* (Göttingen, 2007), 574.

⁶¹Hartmut Traub’s thousand-page book is the most comprehensive attempt to gauge the debt of Steiner’s work to the philosophical traditions of his time. For more see Hartmut Traub, *Philosophie und Anthroposophie: Die philosophische Weltanschauung Rudolf Steiners—Grundlegung und Kritik* (Stuttgart, 2011). For more on Steiner’s Christology see note 71 below.

⁶²While the importance of idealism for anthroposophy is clear, scholars debate its finer details, especially Schelling’s place in its formation. For more see Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 909–18. Undisputed is the influence of Goethe’s *Naturphilosophie* on Steiner’s thinking and Goethe’s own debt to idealism, including to Schelling. See Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago, 2002) esp. 114–92.

⁶³See Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar: Das heilige Buch der Kabbala nach dem Urtext* (Vienna, 1932); Müller, *Der Sohar und seine Lehre*.

⁶⁴Even Gershom Scholem could not help but express his mild appreciation for Müller’s work, especially his translations. See Gershom Scholem, “Ernst Müller: Der Sohar,” *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 37/12

It is taken from the *Idra Raba* (lit. “Great Assembly”) and discusses the problem of spiritual support,⁶⁵ meant here in a cosmic sense: “R. Simeon said to his companions, ‘Until when will we dwell in the place (or status, situation, reality, existence, world, or foundation) of one pillar?’”⁶⁶ The “pillar” is a rich and complicated metaphor that cannot be fully explored here, but roughly it refers to a person who, straddling the spiritual and physical worlds, serves as a spiritual bulwark for the universe, keeping it intact.⁶⁷ Hence Rabbi Shim’on Bar Yohai laments the existence of only one such pillar. According to Daniel Matt, “Rabbi Shim’on seems to be saying, ‘How long will we remain with an inadequate unstable understanding in which the divine structure is not fully comprehended or not yet fully balanced?’”⁶⁸ The imbalance of the universe is the reason why Rabbi Shim’on convenes the Great Assembly in the first place: to remedy the deficiency and erect new pillars. The pillars may include those present in the gathering. They may also include each of the text’s potential readers—for this passage from the *Idra Raba*, which is also the first part of Müller’s anthology, speaks in the language of Steiner’s anthroposophy. It may well be that the Kabbalah’s defining purpose, like that of anthroposophy, is to create human beings who see the universe in its spiritual–physical totality, and are therefore in a position to maintain its integrity.

Steiner might reasonably have accepted the *Idra*’s observations. He too believed in the Kabbalah’s spiritual significance,⁶⁹ though Müller would explore it much further. Anthroposophy for Steiner was a universalistic worldview, and he crucially posited the German national spirit as its embodiment (which, among other reasons, earned him accusations of racism and anti-Semitism).⁷⁰

(1934), 742–4. For more on Scholem and Müller see Gerold Necker, “Ernst Müller’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism and Gershom Scholem,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 40 (2018), 201–23.

⁶⁵In her book on the *Idra*, Melila Hellner-Eshed notes, “The *Idra* is built as a collage of novel exegesis (Midrashim), given by all the members of the convened group. This structure testifies to one of the central issues of the *Idra*: the development of the students from initiates–devotees of Rabbi Shim’on Bar Yohai into independent creators, or in the language of the *Idra*, to ‘Pillars’ upon which the world can rely.” Melila Hellner-Eshed, *Seekers of the Face: The Secrets of the Idra-Rabba (the Great Assembly) of the Zohar* (Hebrew) (Rishon Letsiyon, 2017), 26.

⁶⁶Yehuda Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar: On R. Simeon Bar Yohai as a Messianic Figure,” in Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli, eds., *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany, 1993), 1–84, at 12. Compare also to Müller, *Der Sohar: Das heilige Buch*, 19. Matt translates this as “How long will we sit on a single based Pillar?” Daniel Matt, *The Zohar: Sefer Ha-Zohar*, Pritzker edn, vol. 8 (Stanford, 2014), 318.

⁶⁷Yehuda Liebes writes, “The dual nature of the pillar, as both terrestrial person and cosmic force, becomes clearer when we realize that behind the phrase in R. Simeon’s statement lies the verse ... ‘the righteous is an everlasting foundation’ (Proverbs x:25) and the meanings that have been attached to it in rabbinic and Kabbalistic literature. Especially relevant here is the Talmudic statement, ‘[The world] rests on one pillar, and its name is “Righteous” (*Tzadikim*).’” “The Messiah of the Zohar,” 14.

⁶⁸Matt, *The Zohar*, 318 n. 2.

⁶⁹For more on Steiner’s reception of the Kabbalah see Israel Koren, *Judaism and Anthroposophy: Ancient Controversies in a Modern Garb* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 2019), 941–60. Some scholars have noted that Steiner’s esoteric readings of the Bible influenced Müller. See, for example, Kilcher, “Kabbalah and Anthroposophy.”

⁷⁰The most exhaustive study on Steiner and Judaism is Koren, *Judaism and Anthroposophy*. For more general context see Ansgar Martins, *Rassismus und Geschichtsmetaphysik: Esoterischer Darwinismus und Freiheitsphilosophie bei Rudolf Steiner* (Frankfurt am Main, 2012).

Particularly important to Steiner's thinking were the teachings of Christianity and Christology.⁷¹ Within the history of spirituality, Steiner assigned a critical role to Christianity and especially to Christ for revealing to humanity the true nature of the world. Christ's teachings had in effect made Judaism obsolete: the Old Testament religion, in the tradition of the Western episteme, stood for an atavistic materialism that Christianity had since surpassed. Steiner was not a Christian in the institutional sense, but Christian spirituality was fundamental to his worldview. His historiography understood the evolution of the human race, in its long march towards its spiritual destiny, as reaching its pinnacle with Jesus' universal message. Put simply, Steiner propagated a slightly altered but entirely transparent supersessionist position. Zander writes, "a problem of many Christian theologies reemerges in Steiner poignantly in social-Darwinian manner, namely the demotion of Judaism to a defeated precursor of Christianity."⁷²

Ernst Müller was not deterred. He accepted Steiner's spiritual message but was convinced of the potential of the Jewish tradition. For him, the Kabbalah—in which spiritual progress is personified by the People of Israel—proved the viability of a joint Jewish–Christian worldview. He writes,

Israel is ... both a symbol but also a reality. When the reality of the people [Volk] in its own history, in the effects of its spirit ... in its despair and hopes, in short in all its closeness and distance from God is nothing other than a symbol, that is, a concrete, exemplary, and central instance for humanity's universal path leading down to the original condition of the first human and the future directed to the sacred fruition the complete sanctification of the human life and the life of humanity.⁷³

With this subtle yet forceful statement Müller responds both to Steiner's portrayal of Judaism and to that of an entire Christian tradition. Israel does not belong to a bygone era in the history of the spirit which came to its climax with the appearance of Christ: Israel is a symbol for historical evolution in its entirety, which began from the first man and will conclude with humanity's perfection. In a sense, Müller folds the entire history of spirituality, which Steiner had written as world history, back into a single set of events involving one exemplary people.

Müller's work on the *Zohar* demonstrated that Jews could remain faithful to both Judaism and anthroposophy and that the latter had something to learn from the Jewish tradition. More important, in his attempt to combine the two traditions Müller created a new esoteric school of thought: anthroposophical Kabbalah, or Jewish anthroposophical esotericism. He did not see an essential difference between the spiritual teachings of Christianity, Judaism, and anthroposophy. German idealism, Christ, and Rabbi Shim'on Bar Yohai speak in different ways about the same reality. All three are compatible, from which it follows that

⁷¹"Christology ties together all the thematic elements of Steiner's conceptual building as in a net; one could describe his worldview from the perspective of its Christological element." Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland*, 782.

⁷²Ibid., 830.

⁷³Müller, *Der Sohar und Seine Lehre*, 42.

there should be no fundamental problem living as a German Jewish Christian. Better still, this way of life may very well epitomize what it means to be Enlightened.

The long history of Jewish–Christian religiosity

The tale of Jewish–Christian religiosity, part of which is described above, is new in its particular contours and circumstances. But, as I try to suggest in conclusion, it is also part of a story as old as the Christian faith itself. Over the last two decades, scholars have repeatedly acknowledged the difficulty of finding exhaustive distinctions between two groups which live in the same place, worship the same god, share Scripture, and have a similar set of values.⁷⁴ The history of Jews and Christians is no less entangled than the development of Judaism and Christianity.

Especially illuminating in this context is the research about the beginnings of Christianity. A growing body of work questions the common perception about the “parting of the ways” of Judaism and Christianity.⁷⁵ The clear-cut distinction between Judaism and Christianity implied by this metaphor is nowhere to be found. As Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed write in the introduction to *The Ways That Never Parted*, “Even after the second century, the boundaries between ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian’ identities often remained less than clear, consistent with the ambiguities in the definition of both ‘Jew’ and ‘Christian.’” Scholars of medieval and early modern Europe offer their own versions of this entangled history.⁷⁶ Judaism and Christianity, as we know them today, not only were born together, but also their development was essentially intertwined.

Jewish–Christian entanglement must have been seen to be a less important and less apparent issue for those studying the post-emancipation period in Europe. By the nineteenth century, religious institutions had achieved some form of stability. Both Jewish and Christian identities were fully formed. Secularity has also offered another existential choice for many, who now did not need to choose either Judaism or Christianity. However, it is also during this period that non-institutional

⁷⁴The concept “Judeo-Christian ethics” is an obvious case in point. The term is intertwined with the history of American political thought since the 1930s. For a recent account see K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago, 2019).

⁷⁵The popularization of the term is often attributed to James D. G. Dunn in his book *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London, 1991). For an overview of the different approaches to the problem of defining Judaism and Christianity see also Adele Reinhartz, “Rethinking the ‘Parting of the Ways’ between Judaism and Christianity,” Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies, 2018, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxlVuFr8VUU.

⁷⁶Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Introduction: Traditional Models and New Directions,” in Becker and Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, 2007), 1–33, at 2. Examples of this entangled history are numerous. I mention a small selection of works that offer a more programmatic analysis. See Israel Yaakov Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley, 2008); Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras, and Katelyn Mesler, eds., *Entangled Histories: Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 2016); Debra Kaplan and Magda Teter, “Out of the (Historiographie) Ghetto: European Jews and Reformation Narratives,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 40/2 (2009), 365–94; David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, 2010).

religious trends became immensely influential. As we have seen, German Romanticism, idealism, anthroposophy, and expressionism envisioned new realities which, again, undermined the perceived distinctions between Judaism and Christianity. Following these trends and movements, the works discussed here sought to operate beyond the confines of institutional religion. Buber, Wiener, and Müller aimed to facilitate experiences and feelings rather than lasting social structures. This too was part of a much wider—largely occultist—trend that swept Europe around the turn of the century and in the first part of the twentieth century.

The three examples discussed here should also be understood as parts of a larger trajectory of German Jewry. One can mention figures like Oskar Goldberg, Moses Erich Unger, Jiří (Georgo) Mordechai Langer, and Walter Moses, whose works are beyond the purview of the discussion here but who have all developed some form of Jewish–Christian religiosity. They are all also part of a larger cultural trend.

In the first part of the twentieth century, Jews felt themselves to be culturally integrated even if they were largely excluded from general society. Jewish–Christian religiosity can therefore be seen as another attempt in a long and continuous struggle, undertaken by Jews, to establish a common denominator with Christian societies in Central Europe and to smooth their integration. The better-known attempts are mentioned at the beginning of this article: most were founded on the belief that if anything could bring Jews and non-Jews to communicate with tolerance and impartiality, it would be either ethics or science. Some philosophers, most notably Moses Mendelssohn, argued that a correct understanding of the ethical idea would forever secure Jewish life in Europe. The ethical society would allow Jews to become, as Jews, integral to their life and culture. Following the path of science were the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (science of Judaism), who believed that the correct understanding of the historical sources would demolish Jewish–Christian polarity. Yet both arguments, the ethical and the scientific, were largely rebuffed.⁷⁷

As this article has tried to show, another solution to the problem of integration presented itself only at the beginning of the twentieth century. The common denominator between Judaism and Christianity or between Jews and non-Jews, it has contended, was neither science nor ethics but “religiosity.” I have used the term loosely in the discussion, but to the degree it can be defined, it opposes rational trends that drive modern technology and large societies; it is that which sparks a sense of wonder and it is a central concern for esoteric thinkers because it resists definition and embraces mystery and paradox. This suggestion may be plausible after all. Perhaps it is there, in the far-flung regions of paradoxical thinking, divine insight, and mystical, unity that Christians and Jews find a common language. In any case, Martin Buber, Meir Wiener, and Ernst Müller believed it was.

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⁷⁷This thesis serve as the basis for Wiese, *Wissenschaft des Judentums und Protestantische Theologie*.