

Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, (New Brunswick – Camden – Newark NJ – London: Rutgers University Press, 2019), pp. xiii+219.

by *Daniel Barbu*

### Boyarin's *Judaism* and the Question of Religion

What is Judaism? To this question most people can provide an intuitive response: Judaism is the religion of the Jews. Such an answer, however, also yields further questions: What exactly is religion? And who are the Jews? Leaving these questions aside for a moment, we can observe how scholars of Judaism have sought to define their subject-matter. Thus, for instance, Michael Fishbane, for whom “Judaism is ... the religious expression of the Jewish people from antiquity to the present day as it has tried to form and live a life of holiness before God.”<sup>1</sup> What is implicit in such a definition is the notion that different people have different ways of expressing belief in a transcendent, greater-than-human power (or powers), and that such beliefs shape their every-day actions and experience. That such a definition relies on a modern understanding of religion goes unnoticed, as is the fact that for most of their history, Jews never used the word “Judaism” (or “religion”) to describe their relationship with God or to define their way of life. Only in the wake of the Enlightenment did Jews start talking of their particular beliefs, practices, traditions, in terms of “religion,” a word which by then had gained a new currency and political agency in Western context.

This is the story Daniel Boyarin tells in *Judaism. The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*, published in a series devoted to “key words in Jewish studies.” Boyarin formulates a bold thesis. As he notes, “there is no word in premodern Jewish parlance that means ‘Judaism,’” and thus, “from a linguistic point of view, only modern Judaism could be said to exist” (p. xi). Indeed, according to Boyarin, “it is highly problematic to ascribe to a culture a category or abstraction that it does not know or show in its language” (p. xi). By using the term “Judaism” to describe premodern realities, scholars inevitably and anachronistically impose a distinction between what does and what does not count as “religion.” For Boyarin, “utilizing terms like ‘religion’ and ‘Judaism’ to delineate the concept worlds of people who had no such concepts, or words, is a practice of self-replication and not translation” (p. 8); and indeed: “A form of life that has no

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Judaism. Revelation and Tradition*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 12.

word that means ‘religion’ cannot have religion in it nor can there be a ‘Judaism’ without a word that refers to it” (p. 25).<sup>2</sup>

This is a bold statement indeed, in line with Boyarin’s previous work on the word “religion,” a word which, he claims, “obscures more than it reveals” the social and cultural realities, the “forms of life” of the people we endeavor to study (p. 7).<sup>3</sup> The notion that “religion,” however defined, constitutes a discrete sphere of human existence, distinct from, say, politics, trade, or art, is indeed, as said, a modern notion. Pre-modern societies did not identify “religion” as a separate “sphere of life,” and in fact did not necessarily have a linguistic analogue for the latinate word “religion.” Boyarin’s book is thus an intervention in recent debates on the usefulness of such a category for historical research, with Boyarin adopting a radical position within that debate, standing with those who have argued that the word “religion” should purely and simply be rejected. There can be no “religion” prior to the emergence of the modern concept of “religion”, and hence, there can be no “Judaism” if “Judaism” is indeed considered a species of “religion.”

Boyarin’s book has undeniably opened an exciting debate among scholars of... Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Some have underlined the problematic philosophical underpinnings of Boyarin’s argument.<sup>5</sup> Must the absence of a word or even a concept necessarily imply the absence of the things we refer to through that word? A common place example is oxygen, which was only “invented” (in the literal sense) in 1774; but surely no one would argue that there was no oxygen prior to the late eighteenth-century. This, however, is not Boyarin’s argument. Nowhere does he claim that ancient and medieval Jews did not have beliefs, practices or traditions that may qualify as religion, but rather that, by imposing words such as “Judaism” or “religion” on ancient realities, we distort the conceptual frameworks of the actors themselves. The question is not whether Jews had or did not have “religion” but

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Boyarin’s “point of view,” then, is not only “linguistic.”

<sup>3</sup> See already Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion. How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> <https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/introduction-marginalia-forum-daniel-boyarin-judaism/>. Accessed September 19, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, Adele Reinhartz’s contribution to the *Marginalia* forum, “Was the Word in the Beginning? On the Relationship Between Language and Concepts,”

<https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/word-beginning-relationship-language-concepts/>.

Accessed September 19, 2020.

along which lines and by using which categories did *they*, rather than us, divide the world.

In fact, Boyarin’s close survey of the Arabic word *dīn* (and Hebrew parallel *dat*) shows that medieval Jews did develop a conceptual lexicon in order to articulate classifications and comparisons, albeit not necessarily only in terms we would consider “religious.” Words such as *yahadut* or *al-yahūdiyya* are attested in medieval Jewish literature, in reference to the collective of the Jews; yet, as Boyarin observes, never can these words be reduced to meaning “Judaism” as a “religion.” Never are these words used as the subject of a sentence, for instance. They consistently mean less and more than “religion.” In particular, these notions never fully distinguish between various elements we often tend to consider separately: common ancestry, food habits, dress, law, social and political organization, and so on, along with theological conceptions, rituals, prayer, and other “religious” institutions (in our eyes), just like the ancient Greek historian Herodotus in fact did not distinguish between the Egyptians way of sacrificing, building houses or eating.

In truth, Boyarin’s methodological suggestion that we suspend or reject the use of words like “religion” and “Judaism” when reading ancient and medieval sources can indeed be rewarding, even when such an endeavor yields more questions than answers. It allows him to try and uncover, precisely, the ways in which the actors themselves classified the world, rather than impose our classifications on them. It further allows him to show how their conceptual frameworks differ from ours, thus contributing to a necessary and healthy exotization of the data at hand, which we too often simply translate into our terms, as if their words were really the same as ours.<sup>6</sup>

Boyarin’s onclusions, I would suggest, are however too extreme, and are in fact undermined by Boyarin himself. Thus, when he writes (p. 133) that “If the word picks nothing in their form of life, it is semiotically meaningless,” he seems to be adopting an intriguingly positive view of the work historians, or for that matter scholars, are expected to carry out.

To be sure, words that do not exist in another language are meaningless in that language; but surely Boyarin would agree that they are not meaningless in ours.

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<sup>6</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, “Our Words, and Theirs. A Reflection on the Historian’s Craft, Today,” *Cromohs* 18 (2014): 97–114.

Are not all historians, all scholars in fact, outsiders to the worlds of which they talk? And even when we seek to translate those worlds in our terms, adapting our words to the words of others, do we not remain always foreign speakers – however tempted we are to speak or pretend to speak as natives?

Ponting to the inevitable tension between the way in which insiders view themselves, as opposed to how outsiders describe and classify them (a tension opposing what anthropologists term an “etic” vs. an “emic” perspective), J.Z. Smith cited William James’s ironic observation that “a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean.”<sup>7</sup>

Science is indeed an imperialistic project; yet when we refuse to use our words to translate the words of others, we condemn ourselves to silence (when not to a mere parroting of the other). Boyarin’s suggestion, however, is that rather than impose our words and let them retain their self-evident meaning, we should seek and distort our vocabulary in order to come closer to indigenous conceptions and epistemic frameworks. He thus cites Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (paraphrasing Walter Benjamin), noting that “a good translation ... is one that betrays the destination language, not the source language. A good translation is one that allows the alien concepts to deform and subvert the translator’s conceptual toolbox so that the *intentio* of the original language can be expressed within the new one.”<sup>8</sup> One may in fact recall the advice the medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides gave to his translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon: “The translator who proposes to render each word literally and adhere slavishly to the order of the words and sentences in the original, will meet with much difficulty and the result will be doubtful and corrupt. This is not the right method. The translator should first try to grasp the meaning of the subject, and then state the theme with perfect clarity in the other language.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1929), 10, first quoted (to the best of my knowledge) in Jonathan Z. Smith, “Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit,” *History of Religions* 11/1 (1971): 67–90; Id., “A Matter of Class. Taxonomies of Religion,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 89/4 (1996): 387–403; 402.

<sup>8</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation,” *Tipiti. Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2/1 (2004): 3–22, cited by Boyarin, *Judaism*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Leon D. Stitskin, “A Letter of Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon,” *Tradition. A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 4/1 (1961): 91–95; 93.

Beyond words, the larger question raised by Viveiros de Castro in his *Cannibal Metaphysics* concerned modern science as a whole, albeit through the lens of social anthropology: “What do anthropologists owe, conceptually, to the people they study? ... Couldn’t one shift to a perspective showing that the source of the most interesting concepts, problems, entities and agents introduced into thought by anthropological theory is in the imaginative powers of the societies – or, better, the peoples and collectives – that they propose to explain?”<sup>10</sup>

The political implications of that question are clear, and go beyond the easy critique of modernism and the assumed imperialism of Western science, the accusation that our words can ever only reflect a Euro-centric perspective: “We all know the popularity enjoyed in some circles by the thesis that anthropology, because it was supposedly exoticist and primitivist from birth, could only be a perverse theatre where the Other is always ‘represented’ or ‘invented’ according to the sordid interests of the West. No history or sociology can camouflage the complacent paternalism of this thesis, which simply transfigures the so-called others into fictions of the Western imagination in which they lack a speaking part. Doubling this subjective phantasmagoria with the familiar appeal to the dialectic of the objective production of the Other by the colonial system simply piles insult upon injury, by proceeding as if every ‘European’ discourse on peoples of non-European tradition(s) serves only to illumine our ‘representations of the other’, and even thereby making a certain theoretical postcolonialism the ultimate stage of ethnocentrism.”<sup>11</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, must words like “religion” and “Judaism” necessarily be reduced to their Euro-centric, Christian, legacy? How much did those other ways of conceiving the world which a word like “religion” came to encompass eventually impact the word’s sense and meaning, or even distorted its theologically-informed implications? For scholars of religion wary of the unreflexive use of common categories the answer is obvious. At least since F. Max Müller, they have (successfully or not, but that’s a different question) sought to distinguish between “religion” in the general sense, the word as it used in daily parlance – when we distinguish, for instance, between this or that “religion” – and religion as a generic category, a sort of theoretical concept which

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<sup>10</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics. For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014), 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

serves to establish a disciplinary horizon.<sup>12</sup> In this light, radical critics of “religion,” who insist the word is too heavily fraught by European colonial history and a Christian theological perspective, sometimes seem to be fighting a Quixotical battle.

“Religion,” when used by scholars, is restricted neither by daily language, nor by some sort of commonly accepted schleiermachian definition (“religion” as a matter of private, individual “faith,” and as something distinct from other realms of human experience), indeed inherited from Protestant theology. In fact, the study of religion, ever since the discipline emerged in the late nineteenth-century (indeed first as a product of a colonial impulse to put the world in order), has been a battlefield, characterized by conflicting attempts to define “religion,” including many endeavors to privilege an anthropological over against a theological outlook.<sup>13</sup> That Jewish scholars largely participated in that conversation (e.g. Durkheim) and contributed to the de-theologization of “religion” is a fact that should not be overlooked. In fact, they provide an example of the way in which even the Western discourse of religion has emerged out of a constant process of negotiation between different voices within the Western context, with Jews playing the role of those inner “others” whose distinct anthropological concerns and outlooks indeed informed the discussion on “religion.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Friederich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873), 13. Cf. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. M. Taylor, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-84 (= *Relating Religion. Essays in the Study of Religion*, [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004], 179–96), 281–282: “It was once a tactic of students of religion to cite the appendix of James H. Leuba’s *Psychological Study of Religion* (1912), which lists more than fifty definitions of religion, to demonstrate that ‘the effort clearly to define religion in short compass is a hopeless task’ (King 1954). Not at all! The moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways. Besides, Leuba goes on to classify and evaluate his list of definitions. ‘Religion’ is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as ‘language’ plays in linguistics or ‘culture’ plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.”

<sup>13</sup> For a recent discussion, see Nicolas Meylan, *Qu’est-ce que la religion? Onze auteurs, onze définitions*, (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> Perrine Simon-Nahum, *Les Juifs et la modernité. L’héritage du judaïsme et les Sciences de l’homme en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2018) and Jean-François Bert’s review in *Asdiwal*<sup>14</sup> (2019): 267–69.

In what is perhaps one of his most oft-quoted statements, J.Z. Smith contended that “while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—there *is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization.”<sup>15</sup> Some scholars have taken this statement as a critique of the very concept of religion, arguing, precisely, that there can be no religion prior to the emergence of a semantic category allowing to distinguish religion from other aspects of human existence. There is, they argue, no reason to use a word which moreover carries a heavy burden of Eurocentric, if not Christiano-centric connotations, when studying people or cultures who in contrast with us did not have a concept of “religion,” and thus most likely did not divide the world along these lines.

This, however, was not what Smith meant. His observation that “religion” as a category aiming to describe a specific field of human activity and experience is essentially a product of early-modern European history, in no way implied that scholars ought to dispense with the term, but simply that “the historian of religion must be relentlessly self-conscious.” In other words, “religion” should not be taken for something self-evident, a trans-historical and trans-cultural phenomenon that we can identify “out there.” Rather, like many of the abstract concepts developed in the human and social sciences, “religion” is a map, a tool allowing us to gather certain data and constitute a corpus with a view to answer some greater theoretical or comparative question, to interrogate the functioning of human societies from a necessarily partial but potentially illuminating angle. And as a matter of fact, many anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of religion have since long been able to offer constructive and analytically rewarding definitions. Thus, among contemporary scholars of religion, Bruce Lincoln has suggested defining religion as discourse claiming for itself eternal and transcendent authority<sup>16</sup>; and Philippe Borgeaud, musing on the original meaning of the Latin word *religio*, has offered to take “religion” as a way to describe everything which a given collective considers as customary practice, every tradition, law, habit, unspoken rule, which that collective takes for granted

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan. Z. Smith, *Imagining religion. From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors. Thinking about Religion after September 11*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5-8; Id., *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars. Critical Explorations in the History of Religions*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1; and cf. Meylan, *Qu’est-ce que la religion?*, 169-178.

and which cannot be displaced without arousing discomfort or anger, regardless of whether these traditions, laws, habits, or unspoken rules discursively refer to some sort of supernatural power or authority (or if they are referred to as “religious”).<sup>17</sup>

Such definitions, which effectively destabilize a notion we normally use unreflexively, and subvert its commonly accepted and merely descriptive meaning, do not claim to say what “religion” is in a normative sense. Rather, they show how “religion” can serve as a “map” in our scholarly ambitions to interrogate past and present societies. Of course, the fact that it is possible to define religion in some analytically rewarding way does not mean that we can make away with a careful reflexive analysis of the history of “religion,” a central category in the way *we* perceive and divide the world, of our cognitive language; what it does underline, however, is that the distance between “our” language and “theirs” is less an obstacle than a matter for further thought.

“Judaism” is a central category in the history of the Western discourse on “religion.” Undeniably, it is first and foremost a colonial concept, imposed by outsiders to describe the “religion” of the Jews within a discourse heavily fraught by theological considerations. For much of its history, “Judaism” in fact pertains less to the history of Jews than to the history of Christians, or, to be precise, to the history of the Christian thought patterns from which we have inherited our discourse on “religion.” Throughout its history, moreover, “Judaism” could be used to mean much more than simply a “religion.” As shown by David Nirenberg, “Judaism” has long been a “figure of thought” through which Western thinkers have sought to express certain ideas about the world, to “critically engage the world,” even in the absence of “real” Jews.<sup>18</sup> To a large extent, the history of “anti-Judaism,” of the diverse ways in which ancient, medieval and modern actors sought to position themselves in relation to “Judaism,” is in fact a history of the discourse on “Judaism” rather than simply a history of hostile attitudes towards Jews. In other words, “Judaism” is not

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<sup>17</sup> Philippe Borgeaud, *Exercices d'histoire des religions. Comparaison, rite, mythes et émotions*, eds. D. Barbu and Ph. Matthey, (Leyden: Brill, 2016), 186–187; *La pensée européenne des religions*, (Paris: Seuil, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism. The Western Tradition*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013).



necessarily bound by a discourse on religion, albeit this was the context in which the word was eventually adopted also by Jews.<sup>19</sup>

In the Enlightenment context, discussions of the various “religions” increasingly gave way to debates over “religion” itself, envisaged as a *sui generis* phenomenon, of which the many “religions” Europeans had “discovered” in the four corners of the world, evinced the surprising diversity. Protestant thinkers in particular came to insist on the individual character of “religion,” religion not as a matter of practice, rituals and forms of worship but indeed as a matter of faith and belief. Friedrich Schleiermacher thus insisted that “the essence of religion is neither acting nor thinking, but intuition and feeling” – an idea which undoubtedly continues to infuse modern conceptions.<sup>20</sup> This was the context in which Jewish intellectuals adopted “Judaism” and started to speak of “Judaism” as their “religion,” playing by the rules of a hegemonic discourse in order to gain a voice within contemporary political debates. But Jewish thinkers like Moses Mendelssohn did not simply appropriate “Judaism” and “religion:” they also *adapted* these words to serve their own intellectual interests, while introducing slightly dissonant connotations also reflecting a somewhat distinct epistemic framework.

For Mendelssohn, “religion” was indeed an individual matter, of personal belief and behavior, distinct from politics and other spheres of life. In his *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783), he thus argued that “Judaism” (*Judenthum*) qua “religion” is not concerned with power and politics and is a matter of individual conduct “meant to obtain temporal and eternal felicity.” As such, their “religion” did not prevent Jews from integrating the state as full citizen. The adoption of the discourse of religion, which meant separating

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<sup>19</sup> See Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion. An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*, (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011). Boyarin (p. 105) rightly notes, however, that the question is not whether “Judaism” adopted the language of religion, but rather how Jews adopted “Judaism” in a context that saw the invention of “world religions.”

<sup>20</sup> Friederich Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. I/2, *Schriften aus der Berliner Zeit 1769-1799*, ed. G. Meckenstock, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), 211. It is not uninteresting to observe that when discussing the “nature” of religion, Schleiermacher in fact turned to “Judaism,” precisely to provide a counterexample. Schleiermacher thus insisted that “Judaism is long since dead,” and “those who yet wear its livery are only sitting lamenting beside the imperishable mummy, bewailing its departure and its sad legacy” (*Ibid.*, 314; translated by John Oman). “Judaism,” for Schleiermacher, denoted an unreflective adherence to the Letter, a system of sheer performance, of mechanical rites and practices, deprived of “life” and “spirit.” As such in had no part in “religion” (cf. Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, 26).

religion from public life, conversely allowed creating a political space for Jews distinct from their “religion.” But it also implied a subversion of the notion, as Mendelssohn asserted that the Jews’ religion was “not a matter of belief but rather of behavior,” “ceremonial laws not dogmas.”<sup>21</sup> It is not impossible to see how this broadening of the concept also opened a path for later thinkers to contest a theological understanding of “religion.”

“Religion” is not only the product of Western imperialism – a dominant voice muting the voice of others and imposing its concepts – but of a negotiation between discordant “emic” perspectives, ideas and political endeavors. Those perspectives, ideas, and political endeavors need not necessarily be erased, but must precisely be allowed to distort our own concepts and categories. In that light, even “Judaism,” one may suggest, can accommodate the conceptual worlds of ancient and medieval Jews.

As noted, for most of its history “Judaism” indeed belongs to Christian theological discourse. Only in the wake of Enlightenment debates on “religion” as a distinct and autonomous sphere of life did Jews start to strategically make “Judaism” their own – just as other cultures confronted with Western categories in that context eventually adopted and adapted “religion.”

Does it ensue that we should not speak of “Judaism” when studying pre-modern Jews? Obviously, if we take “Judaism” as the name of some sort of platonic entity, a “religion” the development of which we can observe and describe through time, and the essential features of which we can somehow compare to those of other similar formations, as if they existed independently of the discourse that construes them as “religion,” then indeed Boyarin is right and the answer is yes. If, however, we use it with the same self-consciousness as we do when using “religion” as an analytical category, something which can constantly be corrected and modified in relation to the data it allows us to explore, then perhaps Boyarin is wrong and the answer is no.

There is no essence to “Judaism”, no more than there is an essence to “religion,” for both are fundamentally taxonomic categories, words we use in our languages to map those other worlds we seek to study.

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<sup>21</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, oder über religiöse Macht und Judenthum* (1783), 31, with Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, 20.

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