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
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Is "Judaism" Necessary?: A Response to Boyarin's Judaism

 May 24, 2019 (<https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/judaism-necessary-response-boyarins-judaism/>)  

Shaul Magid on Boyarin's *Judaism*

"One has to square away one's philology before doing one's philosophy" –
Hermann Cohen

There is a joke that floats around Jewish Studies circles that in 200 years, scholars of twentieth-century Judaism will think "Jacob Neusner" was a school and not a person. It would be hard for them to fathom one individual could have produced so much. One could add another iteration of that joke. If the same scholars would read the corpus of Daniel Boyarin they might very well think there was a Boyarin and a deuterio-Boyarin. The first was a philologist who wrote such works as a gloss on the Aramaic dictionary, and then there was a deuterio-Boyarin who was more a theoretician of religion (although the word "religion" is precarious as a descriptor of Boyarin's analysis), who wrote works on Paul, the Rabbis and rhetoric, the Talmud as diaspora, and the dynamics of gender in Judaism. The first Boyarin could have easily informed the second, but they were certainly not the same person.

This theory may all hold water if the scholars in question do not read his new book *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*. They could arguably claim, I suppose, that the body of the book was written by the first Boyarin and the theoretical chapter one was a later insertion by his deuterio namesake. But since we exist in a world with Boyarin in the flesh, we do not have the advantage of distance to make such tosfist casuistry.

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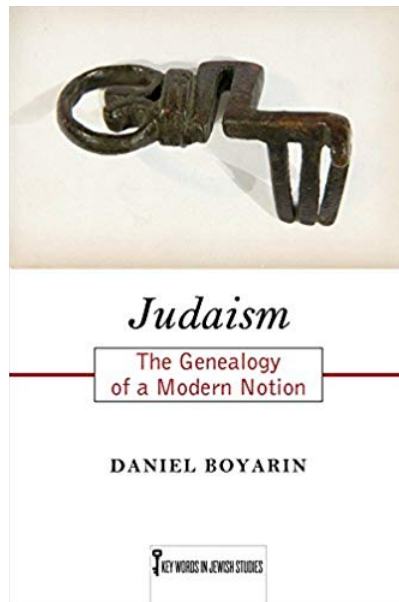
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So what I would suggest, before entering into the body of the argument, is that this book by the one Boyarin we have is an illustration of textually coming full circle. That is, the theoretical frame that so often informs Boyarin's later work is now situated in chapter one to enable us to look more closely at his earlier methodology; that is, the exercise of philology. And part of the purpose of this book – as I read it – is to revive philology as a scholarly enterprise, suggesting that philology performs a function that other forms of textual analysis cannot achieve; this is what I will call the difference between reception history and genealogy. It seems to me that one of the meta-objectives of this book, then, is to make an argument for philology as something – perhaps the only thing

– that we can use to get at the knotty problem of origins, in this case: the origin of the term “Judaism” as a “religion,” or “Judaism” as it is used today. It is important to note that the very question of the genealogy of a term, any term, but certainly one that carries as much weight as “Judaism,” is fraught with numerous challenges, philosophically, historically, and philologically. One could criticize the enterprise that supports the entire project. But that question, in my view, is one for the editors of the “Keywords in Jewish Studies” series and not its authors. The series promotes the very quest for terminological genealogy; its authors provide in-depth analysis of terms under investigation. Boyarin's contribution, *Judaism*, was written under those auspices.

Any genealogy of the proper noun “Judaism” requires us to begin with the Hebrew Bible, where the term *mityahadim* is used as a verb in reference to frightened Persians in the Book of Esther; then we turn to the ostensible Greek and Latin cognates used (if not actually invented) primarily by Christians, the Arabic terminology differentiating between law and the *sunna*, the Hebrew meaning of the term *yahadut* in the Middle Ages, the Yiddish *yadus*, the German *Judentum* – all in order to get to our sense of “Judaism.” The path is of course circuitous and not linear, and the English term is not the final stage of the trajectory but one of its many iterations. But what is the word “Judaism”? Is it simply an Anglicized form of various former iterations, or are we talking about something categorically, or at least significantly, different? Is “Judaism” an exception, or part of a multi-lingual mix? Many others have weighed in on this question, especially in relation to antiquity and late antiquity, and Boyarin's chapter on that period is structured as a salon of sorts where he engages, takes issue, agrees, and disagrees – sometimes to a dizzying degree – with a circle of scholars all of whom are convinced that the Greek and Latin terminology is not cognate to “Judaism” as we know it. This may establish that there is no “Judaism” in late antiquity. But what is there, and when is there “Judaism”?

Here the question of “religion” is paramount, and takes us back to Boyarin's earlier essay, “Semantic Differences of ‘Judaism’/‘Christianity,’” published in *The Ways that Never Parted* in 2003. In that essay, a kind of prolegomenon to this book with some



Daniel Boyarin. *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion*. Rutgers University Press, 2018. 234 pp. \$29.95.

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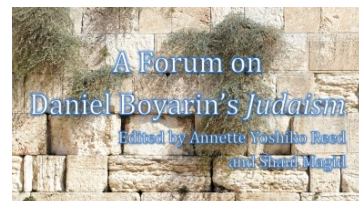


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significant alterations, Boyarin argues that such terminology first requires a stable category of “religion,” which he believed did not exist in antiquity until it was invented by Christians to distinguish themselves from the various other ancestral practices in their midst. If Boyarin is right that Christianity invented the category “religion” as it is used today, and if Judaism as we know it is a religion, then Christianity must have invented Judaism. And it was only much later that Jews appropriated this Christian invention as a label of self-definition. The irony here is that much of the substance of what is called Christianity, which, according to Boyarin, helps invent “religion, [a concept] that is then adopted by Judaism, actually comes from ... Judaism.” So there may be a Judaism before Christianity (which Boyarin prefers to call the “doings” of Jews) but a “Judaism” as “religion” comes only through Christianity.

In this new book, *Judaism*, Boyarin nuances his point somewhat by arguing that “there is not the slightest bit of evidence for ‘religion’ or ‘politics’ as separate spheres in ancient Judea, it is impossible to engage in an argument of whether something is religion or politics within that cultural moment.” He argues further – and he here leans on David Nirenberg’s *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* – that “Judaism” was a term invented by Christians as the anti-version of itself. That is, there is no intrinsic difference between “Judaism” and “anti-Judaism,” as “Judaism” itself is an “anti-” category; it is always the “wrong religion,” which highlights Christianity as the “correct religion.” One sees this not only in the highly polemical middle ages but already in anti-Jewish polemics of the Church Fathers in late antiquity. So the medieval use of the term “to Judaize” is not to engage in Jewish acts but rather to deviate from the truth, whatever the truth is. Here Nirenberg shows us that the term “Judaizer” is often used not in relation to Jews or gentiles who practice Judaism, but rather to those, mostly Christians, who engage in any thought or practice deemed erroneous. Thus the term “Judaism” helps Christianity self-identify as the truth, and thus as “religion.” “Judaism” as a term is thus part of – perhaps the very center of – Christian heresiology and later, simply, error. Or, as Boyarin put it more bluntly: “Nirenberg’s ‘Anti-Judaism’ simply becomes ‘Judaism.’”

When does this begin? Although it is difficult to say, Boyarin suggests the derivation of labeling what Jews do as more than simply their “doings” may begin quite early in the history of Christianity with Ignatius. Writing of Ignatius, Boyarin claims that “*loudaismos* no longer means observance of the law as it did in Paul but a broader sense of Jewish ‘doings’ including verbal ones. In other words, for him *Christianismos* and *loudaismos* are two *doxas*, two theological positions, a wrong one, and a right one, a wrong interpretation of the legacy of the prophets, and a right one.” Jews do what they do, but those doings are not an expression of “Judaism” until Christianity views them as errors.

Of course Jews did things long before there was a Judaism. Or a Christianity. The “-ism” of those doings takes quite a long time to develop as self-definition, into modernity in fact, as others have argued as well. But because Boyarin reaches his conclusion through philology, tracing this modern derivation of “doings” into an “-ism,” he yields more nuanced results and shows that the birth of Judaism, or Judaism as a religion, is not the product of modern constructs, but rather a long process of linguistic moves that reflect Christianity’s view of the Jews more than the Jews’ view of themselves. And thus this project is a defense of philology to say that there is an intrinsic difference between the reception of a term and the genealogy of a term. The former shows how a term gets bandied about through historical time and geographical space and how it lands at a particular moment in time; the latter

is a language game (thus he deploys Wittgenstein). Genealogy traces a birth process whereby a term, travelling through imprecise cognates and linguistic space, finally is born in ways that often counter its previous incarnations.

A good illustration of this is a series of texts Boyarin reads by the fifteenth-century exegete Don Yizhak Abravanel. Living at a time of increased *converso* activity, Abravanel often uses his biblical commentary to criticize the actions of his converted brethren. He uses the term “*yahadut*” in a verbal form as an attack on *conversos*, suggesting that they behave as Jews (*mityahadim*) but, citing Ezekiel 20, “they will be burned in fire.” Ironically, Boyarin suggests, “as Jewish authors become more and more involved with Christians, the likelihood of *yahadut* will at least tend partly, and later fully, to match fully the usage of *Iudaismos* (and its cognates) in Christian usage.” On this reading, at least some iterations of *yahadut* in the late middle ages refer not to what Jews do but rather to what *errant* Jews do. The usage, in other words, is not far from the earlier Christian uses of *Iudaismos* to define Christianity by labeling its errant other. Abravanel perhaps unwittingly mirrors Ignatius’ use of *Iudaismos* in his use of *yahadut*. And it is only via philology, Boyarin argues, that we can see that.

The real birth, as it were, of “Judaism” or the positive attribution of *Yahadut*, comes through the portal of the German *Judentum*. The problem here is that *Judentum* is not a term that defines normative religion *per se* but rather a mix of national or collective identity. The binary often described in modern German discourse is not *Judentum vs. Christentum* but rather *Judentum vs. Deutschtum*. *Judentum* is perhaps more a political term than a “religious” one. It is thus an expansive amalgam of Jewry, Jewishness, and the practices and beliefs of Jews. But if even this inchoate modern sense of “Judaism” seems to encompass all of that, where are there limits to define what it is and is not? Put otherwise, where are the normative boundaries that would define “Judaism” as “religion”? Or is “Judaism” simply everything and anything Jews do?

I want to offer three short examples that may shed some light on this question. The first is the use of the term *Yahadus* by the Hungarian *haredi* thinker Akiva Joseph Schlesinger (1837-1922), who developed a maximalist religious ideology of separation from the Neologs in Hungary and later the Zionists in Palestine. For Schlesinger *Yahadus* is expressed through an act of separation from those around you, including other Jews. Basing himself on the biblical injunction, and supported by midrashim, the vocation of Jews was to create as opaque an enclave as possible within which they could maximally respond to the divine covenant. Schlesinger argued that such an act of separation is the quintessential act of *Yahadus* (can we say “Judaism”?). The normative (*halakhic*) tradition may serve this end, or at least help in doing so, but while halakha may be constructed to cultivate such separation (e.g., as in the case of dietary laws or the prohibition against consuming gentile wine), separation is arguably not its telos. For Schlesinger, separation is the central intent of *Yahadus*. For example, according to Schlesinger Yiddish was as much an expression of Judaism as Hebrew because both function as linguistic acts of separation and are thus equally expressions of *Yahadus*. So for Schlesinger “Judaism” is not simply what any Jew does but rather what some Jews do to separate themselves from everyone who is not doing the right thing – including modern Jews and Zionists. Schlesinger has thus reversed Ignatius and Abravanel: for him, “Judaism” is what is right in the act of separating from everything else that is wrong.

My second example is kind of an inversion of Schlesinger. It is to note how even today “Judaism” is used as a meaningful category mostly by Jews who live bifurcated lives – that is, who live both inside and outside of a world of Jewishness,

as part of the modern contract with the larger world. Those who say “Judaism says...” are usually somewhat distant from the tradition, or at least live in a world where Jewishness is not all encompassing. To say, “Judaism says...” one must already be outside it. Even today “Judaism” is thus not a self-referential category: it is a term used to define X for those who may practice X but also live in Y. Here, too, “Judaism” is always a comparative term.

And here I ask a rhetorical yet serious question: do *haredim* practice Judaism at all? I ask this because from my experience living in the *haredi* world, the term “Judaism” is rarely used; I would go so far as to say it is not an operative term at all. *Haredim* speak of *avodas ha-shem*, *mitzvos*, *devekus*, and even *apikorsus*, but they rarely use terms like “Judaism.” Why is that? Because as Boyarin argued regarding early Christians, and as Abravanel argued regarding *conversos*, and Schlesinger argued regarding Zionists, “Judaism” always stands in opposition to something, either that which is true or that which is false. “Judaism” is either false, opposed to that which is true – its original meaning in Christianity – or true against that which is errant, as in Jewish iterations of the Christian term regarding, say *converos*, or Reformers. But in the *haredi* mindset, there is *emes* and there is *sheker*; there is *avodas ha-shem* and there is *apikorsus*. Neither side of the binary has enough in common with the other to merit calling either one “Judaism.” Or perhaps, contemporary *haredism* has so absorbed Schlesinger’s *Yahadus* as separation that the term has become inoperative.

Whereas reception history can teach us much about how things are the way they are, genealogy can shed light on the processes by which things came to be. What we thus have from Boyarin’s philological genealogy is one reading of “Judaism” that begins as a negative, is turned into a positive, and then becomes irrelevant, except for those who share it with something else. To practice “Judaism” is always also to practice something else in conjunction with it. And since it is common today to say that one can’t practice Judaism and Christianity or Islam simultaneously, “Judaism” now often functions as part of a secular mosaic of “religions” (although Buddhism would require a separate analysis). Boyarin’s genealogy teaches us that Judaism can never stand alone or be alone. If Judaism is all there is, then the term “Judaism” ceases to exist, mostly because it is no longer necessary.

This is the forth essay of the ***Judaism forum***
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