

A Note to Readers:

Thank you for taking the time to read this paper. It is part of a larger manuscript currently titled “What is Religious Freedom? The Case of Conversion in Israel and India.” The book argues that it would be a mistake to interpret the problems of conversion and religious freedom in Israel and India as tensions between liberal rights and religious collectives. Rather, the politics of conversion in Israel and India should be understood in terms of the ways in which Zionists (secular and religious) and Indian nationalists (secular and Hindu nationalist) appropriate some of the basic tenets of the modern nation state—such as the uniformity and sovereignty of law, as well as the importance of individual conviction in matters of religion. As such, anxieties about conversion in Israel and India embody *both the rejection* of a modern, individualist right of religious freedom *as well as the internalization* of this modern, individualist framework. For these reasons, one simply cannot divorce notions of religious freedom (and conversion as the epitome of this notion) from the realities, structures, and ideologies of particular sovereign nation states. While Israel and India may represent extreme cases of the difficulty of separating arguments about religious freedom from arguments about sovereign, national identity, the book contends that these more blatant cases can help us to observe some of the ways in which American and European conceptions of religious freedom are also bound to debates about national identity.

The present paper is very much a work in progress and is a draft of the first chapter which attempts to set the background for debates about conversion after the states of India and Israel were established. I very much look forward to your feedback and thank you in advance for your thoughts.

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Between Ancestry and Belief: “Judaism” and “Hinduism” in the 19th Century

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In today’s world, Zionism and Hindu nationalism are most often understood to be in conflict with various forms of Islamism. But the ideological formations of both developed in the contexts of Christian imperialism and colonialism and, from the perspectives of Zionists and Hindu nationalists, the remaking of Judaism and Hinduism in the image of Christianity. The goal of this chapter is to begin to understand the response of Zionism and Hindu nationalism to Christian imperialism from their own internal points of view. To do so, we must appreciate how anxiety about conversion has been and remains central to the respective self-understandings of Zionists and Hindu nationalists. Recognizing this shared ambivalence about conversion is the first step in answering the question of why looking to Israel and India provides important historical and conceptual resources for considering fundamental debates about religious freedom in today’s world.

Amir Mufti’s 2007 study, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture*, provides an important backdrop to the claims of this chapter. Mufti argues that the “Jewish question,” which emerged together with modern nationalism in the 19th century, regarding whether Jews could fully participate in the political and cultural life of the European state, is paradigmatic for understanding the emergence of “minor critique,” a creative and critical examination of the majority culture by the minority. Applying the “Jewish question” to a literary study of the emergence of a Muslim minority in the wake of the state of India, Mufti exposes some of the ways in which the modern nation state produces a “dynamic of inclusion and exclusion within the very social formation that it claims is uniquely its own.” Mufti recognizes that “exile is an actualization of the threat inherent to the condition of minority.” While his main focus is the emergence of a minority Muslim culture in India, Mufti follows Edward Said in attempting at once to illuminate “the vocation of the modern intellectual, and the vocation of critique” as well as “the conceptual and historical basis for a critique of the Zionist ‘solution’ and its consequences for the Palestinians, for Arabs more generally, and for the global culture of decolonization as a whole.”¹

I follow Mufti in insisting on the relevance of the “Jewish question” for understanding debates about religious and political identity in India. Yet it is also clear that the nationalist “solutions” offered by Zionists and Hindu nationalists to the plight of minoritization represent precisely what Mufti claims “minor critique” calls into question.

¹ Amir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 13. On the broader, complex question of Zionism’s relation to colonialism see Derek J. Penslar, “Zionism, colonialism and Postcolonialism” *Journal of Israeli History* 20:2-3 (2001), pp. 84-98.

Nevertheless, there is intellectual value in broadening a conception of “minor critique” to include the late 19th century origins of Zionism and Hindu nationalism. In their respective historical origins, Zionists and Hindu nationalists offered what they saw as minority critiques of dominant Christian cultural assumptions, and especially Christian claims about tolerance and missionizing in the face of Jewish and Hindu minorities. Pointing this out is not to deny that after the creation of the states of Israel and India, Zionists and Hindu nationalists would establish majority cultures that would produce new Arab, Christian, and Muslim minorities. But it is to suggest that if we wish to understand controversies about conversion in Israel and India today it is necessary to turn to 19th century debates about “Judaism” and “Hinduism.”

Part One: An American Tale

We can begin to understand some of the impetus that would drive Zionism and Hindu nationalism by turning to 19th century America and Palestine, and to a man named Warder Cresson. Born in Pennsylvania in 1798 to a wealthy family of Huguenot descent, Cresson was raised a Quaker but later became a Shaker, a Mormon, a Millerite, a Campellite and eventually a Jew.² Despite his multiple religious lives, Cresson was consistently concerned with two themes: biblical prophecy and the coming of the kingdom of God. Based upon his reading of Isaiah 18, Cresson increasingly believed that only the Jewish people’s return to Palestine could bring about the Second Coming. Like many in Jacksonian America, Cresson also thought the end was near. And he was convinced he had to go to Jerusalem to prepare. As he would later put it: “of one thing am I convinced and satisfied, that there is no Salvation for the Gentiles but by *coming to Israel, to be saved*, as I have done; for I have seen everything give way, and fall through as being insufficient, as all the Law of God and his Holy Prophets declare.”³ Through various family connections, Cresson applied in 1844 to become the first American Consul to Jerusalem. He received this commission and left for Jerusalem. Although his appointment was revoked within a week of his departure, a fact that Cresson appears not to have known, he remained in Jerusalem for four years.

Cresson went to Jerusalem a Christian believing that the Jews all needed to convert to Christianity. He was not alone in this. Beginning in the 1840s several Christian missions, from the United States, Britain, and Germany, among other places, set up shop in Jerusalem with the express purpose of converting Jews. Upon observing the Christian missions to the Jews in Jerusalem, Cresson noted critically that they did not actually succeed in converting Jews. His criticism of Christian missionizing eventually went further as he viewed Christian missionaries as preying on poverty stricken Jews living in squalor. Characterizing his physical and spiritual journey as first and foremost a search for truth, Cresson eventually realized that he had to convert to Judaism:

² For the most comprehensive study of Cresson, see Frank Fox, “Quaker, Shaker, Rabbi: Warder Cresson, The Story of a Pennsylvania Mystic,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 95 (1971): pp. 147-194.

³ <http://www.jewish-history.com/Cresson/cresson01.html>

I remained in Jerusalem in my former faith until the 28th day of March, 1848, when I became fully satisfied that I never could obtain Strength and Rest but by doing as Ruth did, and saying to her Mother-in-law, or Naomi, (the Jewish Church,) " Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge : thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die; and there will I be buried : the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught BUT DEATH PART THEE AND ME. Ruth I: 16-17.

These words of Cresson's are from his long treatise, which he began upon arriving in Jerusalem, *The Key of David: David the True Messiah*, published in 1852 under the name he had taken at his conversion, Michael Boaz Israel.⁴

While it is clear that Cresson's was an exciting life, the events described above are not actually the most interesting aspects of his story, which begin only after his conversion. When Cresson went to Jerusalem he left a wife and children in Philadelphia. After his conversion he returned home in the hopes that his family would convert and move to Palestine with him. But in Cresson's absence, his wife, Elizabeth, had converted herself and become an Episcopalian. Not only did she not want to convert to Judaism, but she also went to court to have Cresson declared incompetent for having converted to Judaism. In 1849, Elizabeth legally requested that he be committed to an asylum. A Sheriff's jury of six declared Cresson insane. Cresson hired a lawyer, General Horatio Hubbell, who successfully appealed this decision. In 1851 Cresson was granted a new trial in which the jury would have to answer the question: was he a lunatic for having converted to Judaism?⁵ After a six-day trial, the jury concluded that Cresson was not a lunatic. While seventy-three witnesses were called to testify on Cresson's behalf, the jury seems to have ultimately been swayed by a medical "expert" who claimed that he had a scientific and foolproof test for lunacy, based upon an analysis of the roots of an individual's hair. Apparently, Cresson's hair passed the test for sanity. After his acquittal, Cresson subsequently sold his property, moved to Palestine, remarried and devoted himself to improving the lives of his fellow Jews in Palestine by teaching them farming.

As many of his contemporaries recognized, Cresson's trial raises some basic questions about the meaning of religious freedom. Despite the apparent persuasiveness of the medical expert's testimony in exonerating Cresson of lunacy, Hubbell argued that American religious freedom was at stake in the trial: "it is immaterial, as Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson observed, whether a man worships one god or twenty, as long as he fulfills the

⁴ *The Key of David* was first published in Philadelphia, 1852. More recently, the text was published as *The Key of David* (Frankston, Texas: TGS Publishers, 2006.) Citations in this chapter are from <http://www.jewish-history.com/cresson/cresson01.html>

⁵ Isaac Leiser, "The Lunacy Trial of Warder Cresson," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* 21 (1863): 206, pp. 308-9. The transcript of the trial was lost in a fire in 1879. Leiser published his account of the trial based on Horatio Hubbell's notes in *The Occident* in 1863, including the attorney's closing argument.

duties and executes the obligations demanded of a citizen.” Cresson concurred with this assessment and sarcastically added: “If a Jew turn Christian, it is all natural and proper, we dare say; but if a Christian turn Jew, the man must be insane!” Much of the press coverage of the trial also focused on what was then a relatively new idea—that religious freedom and the right to change beliefs ought to include not only the right to convert to different sects within Christianity but also to Judaism or any other non-Christian religion.

Yet to conclude with this interpretation of the trial’s significance for thinking about religious freedom is to miss two significant points. First, as Lincoln Mullen has persuasively shown, it was only in the 19th century that Americans began to view religious identity as a matter of individual choice and not family inheritance.⁶ While Cresson’s conversion history may have been particularly colorful, his serial conversions were part of broader changes to the American religious and political landscapes in which religious conversions, even multiple ones, became common. As briefly discussed in the introduction, this confirms again some of the ways in which the convergence between religious freedom, conversion, and individualism is of very recent vintage in human history. Second, to understand Cresson’s trial as solely about a Jeffersonian defense of an individual’s right to believe whatever she chooses to believe is to miss something essential about Cresson’s self-understanding, which is that his conversation meant simultaneously a faithful commitment to a particular God and to a particular people. Cresson’s *The Key of David* is largely a theological tract detailing what he argues are the inconsistencies and falsehoods of Christianity in light of Judaism’s theological truths. But Cresson’s chosen name—Michael Boaz Israel—as well as the subtitle of the book—“David the True Messiah”—both elude to the Book of Ruth and to what Cresson takes to be Ruth’s own conversion. And it is thinking about the Book of Ruth that will allow us to connect Cresson’s adventures to current debates about conversion in Israel and India.

Cresson is explicit about his admiration for the Book of Ruth: “Of all the most instructive and truthful lessons to teach the soul how to attain *Rest* and *Strength*, where “the wicked cease from troubling, and the WEARY be at REST,” (Job 3:17) this Divine Book of Ruth exceeds all others.” Let us recall the basic narrative of the book. Ruth was a Moabite who married an Israelite. There was a famine and Ruth’s husband, his brother, and his father all died. Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi urged Ruth to return to her people. But Ruth pledged her loyalty to Naomi and to Naomi’s people, saying. “Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Destitute and hungry, Naomi takes Ruth to the fields of Boaz, her kinsman, where she is able to glean from the remainders left for the poor. When they meet, Ruth thanks Boaz for his kindness and he expresses his admiration for her: “It hath fully been told me, all that thou hast done unto thy mother-in-law since the death of thy husband; and how thou hast left thy father and thy mother, and the land of thy nativity, and art come unto a people that thou knewest not heretofore” (Ruth 2:11). Cresson identifies with Boaz’s description of Ruth and commenting on this verse writes, “Is it possible for words to express and describe more fully the practical walk of an honest convert, who has

⁶ Lincoln Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

left everything near and dear to him on earth to go to Jerusalem, as I did?” Boaz’s marriage to Ruth produces a son, which the end of the Book of Ruth tells us leads to the birth of David who, Cresson maintains, is the only true Messiah.

Our brief discussion of the importance of the Book of Ruth for Cresson allows us to see that he understood his conversion not only as a matter of changed belief but also, and as importantly, as a matter of familial and national identity. Here Cresson is merely elaborating on Ruth’s own words to Naomi: “your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Because of his emphasis on joining the Jewish people and moving to Palestine, some have seen Cresson as an early American Zionist.⁷ This, to me at least, seems anachronistic since Zionism, as a modern political or even ideological movement, did not develop until the late 19th century. And when it did, Zionism was largely a secular, even an anti-religious movement. What is important about Cresson for our purposes is his actual historical moment in which he combined what increasingly would become a very American understanding of religious identity—as the result of an individual conviction and choice—with a conception of religious identity—as *dependent* upon kinship and inheritance—that historically lost favor in American and international definitions of religious freedom.

The states of Israel and India, established only in 1948 and 1947 respectively, stand at precisely the intersection between these two conceptions of religious freedom and identity. Israel’s Declaration of Independence “guarantee[s] freedom of religion, [and] conscience.” Article 25 of the Indian Constitution protects “freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.” The right to change religion is legally protected in India and Israel. In this way, the modern states of India and Israel differ fundamentally from states such as Saudi Arabia, which view religious conversion out of Islam as corrosive to national identity and, unlike India and Israel, simply outlaw it. Despite common misperception to the contrary, especially in the case of Israel, Hinduism and Judaism are not established state religions, such as Lutheranism (the Church of Sweden) in Sweden or the Anglican Church in England. Nevertheless, unresolved problems concerning the respective meanings and natures of Judaism and Hinduism remain at the heart of the projects of Zionism and Indian nationalism, and hence at the center of contemporary debates about national identity in Israel and India.

Anxieties about conversion in Israel and India stem from the complicated legacies of colonialism and its ties to Christian missionizing. Just as religious conversion epitomizes religious freedom in contemporary discussions of religious freedom in democratic societies and human rights discourse, so too the notion that religious conversion defines religion as such is a notion associated historically with Christianity, and it is this notion that Zionists, religious and secular, and Indian nationalists, secular and Hindu, resist. But worries about conversion are also connected to historical Jewish and Hindu ambivalence towards conversion, since both traditions, complex and diverse as they are, have understood religious identity largely in terms of kinship and inheritance.

⁷ On the broader subject of Cresson’s relation to Christian Zionism, see Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Part Two: Historical “Jewish” and “Hindu” Ambivalence About Conversion

Before attempting to parse some of the broad overlaps between historical Jewish and Hindu ambivalence about conversion it is necessary to make clear what I mean by “Judaism” and “Hinduism” or, perhaps a bit more precisely, what I do *not* mean by them and the related labels “Jewish” and “Hindu.” I do not use these terms to posit timeless, monolithic or essentialist identities to these traditions or to the people who claim to adhere to them. Like all traditions, “Judaism” and “Hinduism” have changed over time. Both historically as well as today, there is no single Judaism nor single Hinduism but rather competing Judaisms and competing Hinduisms. When I use the terms Judaism, Jewish, Hinduism, and Hindu throughout this book I refer to specific ways in which particular people in particular places and times construct these identities.

The traditions today referred to as Judaism and Hinduism were first identified not by doctrines or beliefs but by location. The term “Iodaisos” originally meant “Judean” and referred to the inhabitants of the geographic region associated with the biblical tribe of Judah. Only later the term came to be translated as “Jew.”⁸ Similarly, the Sanskrit word “Sindu” refers to the River Indus and its geographical region. Muslims called the people living in that area Hindus, which also came to connote non-Muslims.⁹ It was only in the 18th and 19th centuries that both Judaism and Hinduism came to be defined specifically as “religion.” Prior to the modern period, Judaism was not just a religion but also a culture and nationality. It was only when Jews became citizens of modern nation states that they would argue that Judaism was a religion like Christianity. The historical origins of Zionism can be understood in large part as a rejection of the claim that Judaism is a religion. Political, cultural, and ultimately religious Zionists all decried the split demanded by the modern European nation states between Judaism’s religious and national elements. Hinduism also only came to be described as a religion in the modern period. When, in the nineteenth century, the British census called for locals to declare their religion, the term Hindu took on a distinctly religious meaning. The idea that Hinduism was a homogeneous tradition displaced what had been a far more variegated reality of multiple, overlapping communities defined by location, language, caste, occupation, and sect.¹⁰ As is the case with Jewish nationalism, the historical origins of Hindu nationalism can be found in the rejection of the colonialist baggage that came with the claim that Hinduism is a religion. Coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the father of Hindu nationalism, the term *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness”) opposes the colonialist construct of Hinduism as a religion in order to promote a broader view of Hindu culture, nationality, and civilization.¹¹

⁸ On this topic, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁹ Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹¹ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar concisely summarizes this perspective: “Hindus are bound together not only by the tie of the love they bear to a common fatherland and by the common blood that courses through their veins and keeps our hearts throbbing and our affection warm but also by the tie of the common homage we pay to our great civilisation, our Hindu culture,” *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* 2nd ed. (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), p. 91.

Like all forms of nationalism, the varieties of Jewish and Indian nationalism are modern inventions, which draw on imagined pasts. That modern nationalisms are imagined communities is by now a scholarly commonplace.¹² Less emphasized in scholarly and popular discourse is the corresponding implication that modern religious communities, like all communities, are also imagined. These imaginings, and their respective relations to their imagined pasts, are never static but always changing in response to unexpected circumstances as well as in relation to the internal contradictions of any imagined community. As Gershom Scholem has argued, “Tradition as a living force produces in its unfolding another problem. What had originally been believed to be consistent, unified and self-enclosed now becomes diversified, multifold and full of contradictions. It is precisely the wealth of contradictions, on differing views, which is now encompassed and unqualifiedly affirmed by tradition.”¹³ In all of their respective varieties, Jewish and Indian nationalisms, like “Judaism” and “Hinduism,” remain living forces because their meanings remain undetermined. And they remain undetermined in large part because the circumstances and other ideological formations to which they respond are also always changing.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that there are no pure or static identities, certain themes in Jewish and Indian self-understanding, in their many religious and political forms, do repeat themselves in different ways throughout history. Ambivalence about religious conversion is one such theme. Because Jewish and Indian religious traditions have historically linked religious identity to ancestry and kinship, they have historically often been hesitant about the possibility of conversion. This is one reason that Jewish and Indian traditions have not historically been missionizing religions. In the case of Judaism, the importance of ancestry in defining membership in the Jewish community was directly linked to Jewish responses to Christian claims that the Church had replaced the Jews as the new Israel. As Martha Himmelfarb has put it:

As Christians claimed to have taken the place of the old Israel, some rejected the language of ethnicity altogether...while others claimed that they constituted a new people defined not by genealogy but by merit. Against these claims, Jews insisted—as much to themselves as to Christians—on the continued viability of the old Israel and the guarantee of redemption inherent in the descent from Abraham.¹⁴

In the Indian case, the importance of ancestry in defining membership in a given religious community was linked to caste, a complex topic to which we will return below. But perhaps as basically, religious identity, unlike social identity, in India was not conceived of in exclusivist terms. As Wendy Doniger has put it: “it is generally better to reserve that term [conversion] for interactions with religions that have jealous gods, like Islam and Christianity. For ordinary people living in ancient South India, religious pluralism

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1998).

¹³ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Knopf, 2011), p. 290.

¹⁴ Martha Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 165.

was more of a supermarket than a battlefield. Laypeople often gave alms to Buddhist monks or, later prayed to Sufi saints and still visited Hindu temples.”¹⁵

Yet despite their misgivings about conversion and missionizing, Jewish and Hindu traditions have historically allowed outsiders to join Jewish or Hindu communities, though under very particular circumstances. In both cases, a change in belief is not the main criterion for membership in Jewish or Hindu communities. Rather, an imagined relation to ancestry is primary. From a traditional Jewish perspective, conversion literally changes a proselyte’s lineage. Upon converting to Judaism, a proselyte takes a new name, which includes the designation daughter/son of Abraham and Sara. This new lineage is heightened all the more so when we recognize how little individual beliefs seem to matter in the Jewish conversion ceremony. Shaye Cohen concisely summarizes this ceremony described in the Babylonian Talmud as follows:

‘Conversion’ is understood primarily in terms of enfranchisement. The potential convert is asked: ‘Why have you decided to approach (us) to be converted? Do you not know that Israel at this time is pained, oppressed, harassed and torn, and that afflictions come upon them?’ If the candidate says, ‘I know and am unworthy,’ he is accepted and is given instruction in ‘a few of the light commandments and a few of the severe commandments.’ At the end of the catechism, he is circumcised and becomes ‘like an Israelite in all respects.’... What is missing...is any association of enfranchisement with a change in belief or a change of spirituality. Perhaps this is implicit in the rabbinic ceremony, but it certainly is not explicit.¹⁶

If it is difficult to see the Jewish conversion ceremony as a direct analog to a notion of conversion as a change in individual belief, the Indian case presents even more of a challenge. As R.K. Ghai has noted, the term often used for conversion, *shuddhi*, “cannot be equated with the term conversion as understood in the West. There the term conversion applies to a marked change of heart, an emotional regeneration, typically sudden in its advent or consummation, affecting radically the outlook, the inner adjustment and the habits of life of an individual.”¹⁷ There is no mention of conversion in classical Brahmin texts. In Sanskrit *shuddhi* means purification and in early Brahmin texts the term referred to a ceremony of ritual purification. But in response to Moslem conversion of Hindus to Islam, *shuddhi* became a ceremony of reinstating converts to Hinduism. As Doniger puts it: “In the fifteenth century the Brahmins thought that there was already a need for conversions back to Hinduism;--they overhauled the ancient ceremonies designed to reinstate Hindus who had fallen away from caste (usually as a result of some ritual impurity and evolved ceremonies for reconversion, called purification (*shuddhi*), usually involving both the payment of money and a ritual.”¹⁸ As will be discussed further in chapter two, *shuddhi*, or reconversion, became a central

¹⁵ Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 368.

¹⁶ B. Yevamot 47a-b, Cohen pp. 237-238

¹⁷R. K. Ghai, *Shuddhi Movement in India* (Commonwealth Publishers, 1990) p. 3

¹⁸ Doniger, pp. 546-547.

theme in Hindu nationalist arguments in the nineteenth century. We can see here how central the reimagining of lineage is to becoming a member of the Hindu community. Just as Cohen argues that conversion to Judaism should be “understood primarily in terms of enfranchisement,” shuddhi is better understood as “a change of fellowship [rather] than of conduct of inner life although the latter may in time occur.”¹⁹

Let us return to the issue of kinship. Whereas conversion is the rule for Christianity, conversion is the exception for Judaism and Hinduism. From an historical Christian theological perspective, no one is born a Christian. Everyone is a convert. In contrast, from historical Jewish and Indian perspectives, members of Jewish and Hindu communities are born as such. It is the exceptions—in the Jewish case the rare individual willing to join the fate of the Jewish people, in the Hindu case members of other communities who have been disassociated from their ancestral ties, who can become kin. Put in other terms, from an historical Christian perspective there is no ambivalence about conversion but there is ambivalence about kinship, as we read in Matthew 12: 46-50:

[Jesus'] mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

In contrast, from historical Jewish and Indian perspectives, there is no ambivalence about kinship but there is ambivalence about conversion.

Part Three: This Doesn't Sound Like Religion: Judaism and Hinduism in the Colonial Mind

An immediate objection to our brief discussion of conversion historically understood by Jews and Hindus might be that this doesn't sound like religion. And that is precisely the point. Historical Jewish and Hindu conceptions of conversion upset what is by now a conventional understanding of religion focusing primarily on an individual's internal transformation. The Jewish conversion ceremony and Hindu shuddhi rituals conform neither to contemporary conceptions of conversion nor to classical Christian conceptions of conversion, such as Augustine's account of his own transformation in book 8 of his *Confessions* as a sudden “light of serenity infused into my heart.”

This contrast between Christianity, on the one hand, and Hinduism and Judaism, on the other, was not lost on Christian missionaries to India. Beginning in the 19th century, Christian missionaries molded their conceptions of Hinduism by way of what was for them an analogy to Judaism. In fact, Christian missionaries in India conceived Indian religions as “Jewish.” For instance, in his 1833 memoir, John Adam, a missionary in Calcutta, described the Indians he met as “the counterparts of the Jewish nation,”

¹⁹ Ghai, p. 4

adding that “[t]he Brahmins correspond to the Pharisees.”²⁰ Christian missionaries also often viewed Indian religions in terms of idolatry. Here too they invoked “Judaism.” Reverend C.T.E. Rhenus, a member of the English Church Missionary Society, traveled to South India in 1813 and concluded “from a comparison of various heathenish rites with the Jewish, that we are warranted in adopting, of course with the necessary distinctions, the same reasoning which St. Paul used to the Jews in his letter to the Hebrews. He represented those rites as ‘the shadow of true things in Christ Jesus.’ Idolatry expected, the Heathens have nearly the same rites as the Jews. I allude to the various sacrifices, ablutions, & c.”²¹

The shorthand of “Pharisees” or “Jewish” as applied to Indian religions is not as surprising as it might at first seem. The Christian theological distinction between faith and superstitious ceremonies has a long history. Alternatively called the spirit and the letter, or the spirit and the flesh, the old law and the new law, or false and true religion, Christian theologians associated the former with Judaism and the latter with Christianity. Associating Judaism with the former and Christianity with the latter, Augustine, for instance, distinguishes between “the threatening of the letter” and “the helping and healing of the Spirit.”²² But whereas pre-Reformation Christian theology still held an important theological place for ritual, post-Reformation thinkers, beginning with Martin Luther, intensified the distinction between what they now called faith and works, and attacked the Catholic Church as “Jewish.”²³ And as we will see below, 19th century Jewish and Hindu reformers would internalize the Protestant distinction between ceremony and faith, maintaining that the true forms of Judaism and Hinduism also corresponded to the latter and not to the former.

While Christian missionaries condemned Hindu law as idolatrous superstition, the colonial government in India ostensibly committed itself to respecting the indigenous religions in India. In the service of what they regarded as toleration of local Indian traditions, the colonial government dedicated itself to reforming Hindu law for the purpose of preserving the true Hindu religion. Yet as a number of scholars have argued, the colonial government’s reform of Hindu law was predicated on distinctly Christian theological assumptions, beginning with the general notion that “Hindu law” was only to be discovered in divinely revealed, sacred texts.²⁴ More particularly, the very enterprise of reforming Hindu law was based on a modern Protestant distinction between true and false religion. In the words of Jakob De Roover, the British “smuggled in the theological distinction between true religion as the revelation of God and false religion as human additions to religion.... Some practices were accepted as truly religious, while others were rejected as illegitimate additions to religion.”²⁵

²⁰*Memoir of John Adam, Late Missionary of Calcutta* (London: J. Cross, 1833), p. 225.

²¹*Memoir of C.T.E. Rhenius, by his son J. Rhenius* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1841), p. 71.

²² Augustine, *Later Works* (Philadelphia: West Minster, 1955), p. 204.

²³ See for instance Martin Luther, “Concerning Two Sorts of Men in Respect of Faith: And What True Faith Is,” *Selected Works of Martin Luther*, vol. 1 (London: T. Bensley, 1824), pp. 417-426.

²⁴ See Likhovski 1999 “Protestantism and the Rationalization of English Law: A Variation on a Theme by Weber” *Law & Society Review* 33(2) 365-91 and Robert Yelle, *The Language of Disenchantment* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

²⁵Jakob De Roover, *Europe, India and the Limits of Secularism* (Oxford, 2016), p. 187

Most basically, in their reformation of Hindu law, the British excluded what they characterized as “ritual” from the definitions of both religion and law. The freestanding category of ritual, as well as its distinction from the freestanding categories of “law” and “religion” were foreign to historically Jewish and Indian traditions alike. As Shai Lavi has remarked in the case of Judaism, “the term ‘ritual’ itself was alien to the Jewish tradition. Its closest translation to Hebrew, *pulhan*, signified idol worship. Jews, at least traditionally, were more likely to speak of *mitzvah* (obligation or commandment) or *halacha* (a specific prescript, but also the entire code). Thinking of Jewish practice as ‘ritual’ would have made little sense to traditionalist Jews, since for them there was nothing conspicuous about these practices. They were simply the way Jews led their daily lives and belonged to the *world* created by Jewish law.”²⁶ And as Robert Yelle has put it in the case of Indian traditions: “Traditionally dharma encompassed much of what is understood by the categories law and religion, and was at once a legal code, a metaphysics, a cosmology, a system of moral, and a set of ritual techniques. British viewed this mixture, and especially its ritual elements, as evidence of a primitive stage of development in which law and religion had not yet assumed their proper and distinct identities... For many British and other Europeans, Hinduism confused or cofounded law with religious and especially ritual precepts in a manner that recalled ancient Judaism.”²⁷

The exclusion of ritual from definitions of both religion and law also found its way into early modern philosophy, epitomized most clearly in Immanuel Kant’s 1793 *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* in which Kant contrasts true religion, which he equates with reason, the moral law, and autonomy, with “Priest craft,” which he defines as “fetish-service” falsely concerned with “statutory commands, rules of faith and observances.”²⁸ Within Kant’s framework, Judaism is not a religion but a “collection of mere statutory laws.” Nevertheless, Kant concedes that Judaism could “in the historical doctrine of faith ... remain as an antiquity”²⁹ though an historical account of faith was not to be confused with “rational religion.” The British regarded Hinduism much in the same way that Kant, in keeping with a long history of Christian theology, viewed Judaism: as a particularist, historical antiquity that did not meet the criteria of true religion or universality. Yet the British also believed, as did Kant, that since their conception of true religion was both rational and universal, Hinduism, like any human artifact, could be reformed to conform to rational, universality.

To be sure, by the 18th and 19th centuries the situations of Jews in Europe and of Hindus in India were different. To varying degrees, Jews ostensibly became equal citizens of nation states in Europe while Hindus and other non-Christians in India remained under colonial rule. Yet the terms of the debate over Jewish emancipation in Europe, which continued into the 20th century, provide a striking parallel to the Indian case. In both cases, practices designated as religious rituals were both viewed through

²⁶ Shai Lavi, “Enchanting a Disenchanted Law: On Jewish Ritual and Secular History in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *UC Irvine Law Review*, 1:3, p. 826.

²⁷ Yelle, p. 138

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), p. 199.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

Christian theological lenses and would become increasingly intertwined with if not regulated by the purportedly secular state.

The liberal Protestantism of both Britain and continental Europe dissociated law, religion, and ritual from one another in the service of (what it perceived as) reason and universalism. And it was for their supposed irrationality and parochialism, if not chauvinism, that Jewish and Indian rituals were continually interrogated. In the 18th and 19th century European context, debates about ritual slaughter and circumcision, and how the state might tolerate or eliminate these practices, revolved around whether these “rituals” had a scientific basis as well as about whether they are in the service of what were perceived as anti-social Jewish practices. These debates of course continue in Europe today where they are directly largely at Muslim “ritual” practices. In the Indian context, the British omitted much of “ritual” from their reforms of “Hindu law.” For instance, early British translations and compilations of Hindu law, such as Nathaniel Halhed’s *Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776) and Henry Colebrook’s *A Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions* (1797-1798), largely excised rules related to ceremonial observances.³⁰

Nowhere is the contested legacy of British colonialism more pronounced than in debates about the meaning of caste and its purported relation to Hinduism. As many scholars have shown, Christian missionaries and the colonial government often had conflicting official approaches to caste. Missionaries generally condemned caste for religious and moral reasons, though, as we will see in later chapters, Christian communities in India retained caste distinctions for proselytes. The colonial government tolerated caste and also enforced, strengthened and perhaps even created caste distinctions. Nevertheless, despite these differences, Christian missionaries and the colonial government agreed in defining caste as essentially religious and as distinctively Hindu. Once again, the parallels between Judaism and Hinduism in the colonial mind are striking. In the words of the 1850 Missionary Conference in Madras, caste was a “religious institution” on par with the “Jewish ceremonial law.” As such, both were “anti-social” rules that “separated man from man.”³¹

Part Four: Internal Jewish and Hindu Responses

In arguing against Christian characterizations of Judaism and Hinduism respectively, Jewish and Hindu reformers of the 19th century often internalized the Protestant terms of these debates. A brief comparison of the German Jewish historian Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) and the India mystic Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) is particularly instructive for appreciating the relevance of conversion for the respective emergences of Jewish and Hindu nationalism. At first glance, Geiger and Vivekananda do not appear to have much in common. Geiger was the intellectual force behind Reform Judaism and Vivekananda was the first to introduce Vedanta and Yoga to the modern

³⁰ As Yelle points out, “Christian attitudes toward Judaism served as a model for the interpretation of Hinduism and informed the marginalization of Hindu ritual laws, which, like the laws of Moses with which these were frequently compared, were relegated to a now superseded stage of human evolution” pp. 141-142.

³¹As quoted in Yelle, p. 152

west. Geiger believed that the academic study of history was the main path to truth, while Vivekananda concerned himself with mystical and esoteric knowledge. The two would also seem to be at odds politically. Whereas Geiger rejected Jewish nationalism and embraced German nationalism, Vivekananda's writing on Hinduism and his advocacy of Hindu nationalism went hand in hand. And while Geiger deeply admired Islam and considered historical Jewish-Islamic relations a model for a German-Jewish symbiosis, Vivekananda's antipathy towards Islam, based on his conception of historical Hindu-Muslim relations, was foundational for his Hindu nationalism.

Yet despite their important differences, to which we will return briefly below, Geiger and Vivekananda's respective arguments share a number of strikingly common features. To begin with, Geiger and Vivekananda use a similar strategy to counter Christian criticisms of Judaism and Hinduism. Both begin by agreeing with their Christian interlocutors that "religion" concerns an individual's spiritual relation to the divine. They also agree with Christian critics of Judaism and Hinduism that true religion needs to be distinguished from ceremonial law, in the case of Judaism, and from caste, in the case of Hinduism. But they reject Christian claims that Jewish ceremonial law and Indian rituals as well as caste are in fact religious or even essential to Judaism or Hinduism respectively. Rather, they argue, the ceremonial law, Indian ritual, and caste distinctions are the contingent results of the historical persecution of Jews and Hindus and subsequently passive Jewish and Hindu responses to this denigration.

Both describe vibrant beginnings to Judaism and Hinduism respectively, followed by a long history of decline. Both see their present historical juncture, and modern rationality and science, as an opening to a return to origins. Geiger attributes increasing Jewish obsession with the intricacies of Jewish law, which he contends are not fundamentally religious in nature, to internal Jewish responses to their historical oppression. He divides Jewish history into four periods: revelation, tradition, legalism, and liberation. Revelation is "an era of free, creative formation from within" that extends to the close of the biblical era. Tradition marks the period from the completion of the Bible to the completion of the Babylonian Talmud. Legalism "is characterized by the toilsome preoccupation with the heritage as it then stood" and lasts, Geiger argues, until the middle of the eighteenth-century. Liberation begins just as legalism ends. This is Geiger's own era, in which "the bond with the past has not been severed" and "what is being attempted is solely to revitalize Judaism and to cause the stream of history to flow forth once again."³²

Vivekananda finds the origins of Hinduism in a great Aryan civilization, which he describes as "the profound thoughtfulness of a godly race"³³ that blossomed in ancient India. He argues that neither the caste system nor the obsession with ritual as practiced in 19th century India were part of this original glory: "in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallized social institution, which after doing its service is

³²Abraham Geiger, *Abraham Geiger and Liberal Judaism*, ed. Max Wiener (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), pp. 156-157.

³³ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, http://belurmath.org/complete_works_of_swami_vivekananda/, Vol. 4, p. 332.

now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality.”³⁴ Vivekananda argues that the development of caste and other ritual practices was an historical response to Muslim and Christian violence against Hinduism. But just as Geiger argues that in the age of science and reason Judaism can be revitalized by a return to Jewish origins, so too Vivekananda contends that the “huge cremation-ground, strewn with the dead bones of lost hope, activity, joy and courage,”³⁵ of 19th century India can be overcome by returning Hindus to the former glory of their spiritual tradition.

One might conclude at this point that Geiger’s characterization of Judaism, and well as Vivekananda’s portrayal of Hinduism, are merely apologetic. After all, both accept the Christian framework of their critics, which locates true religion in spirit and rejects the outward trappings of particular rituals. On this reading, Geiger and Vivekananda simply offer formulations of Judaism and Hinduism that are in keeping with this framework. But to leave things at this is to neglect the simultaneous subversive nature of their arguments. Once again, they share a common strategy: Geiger and Vivekananda invert the Christian claim that Judaism and Hinduism are but backward relics of the past and argue instead that it was Judaism and Hinduism that gave birth to human civilization as such. Despite their different historical sources and philosophical orientations, Geiger and Vivekananda each describe Judaism and Hinduism respectively as an original rational and moral source, which complements the legacies of Greek philosophy and science in defining human civilization. Defining Judaism as pure monotheism, Geiger characterizes Judaism and Jews as the religious genius of humankind, which complements Greek philosophy and science. Vivekananda describes Hinduism as “the grandest religion of the world,”³⁶ which complements the materiality of the west that has its roots in Greece. While at times he describes Judaism negatively because of its historical association with Christianity, Vivekananda also suggests a striking parallel between the spiritual heritages and historical experiences of Hindus and Jews: “What may be the force which causes this afflicted and suffering people, the Hindu and the Jewish too (the two races from which have originated all the great religions of the world) to survive, when other nations perish? The cause can only be their spiritual force.”³⁷

For Geiger and Vivekananda respectively, neither Judaism nor Hinduism needs to catch up to the superior truths of Christianity. Rather, it is Christianity that needs to learn from the original truths of Judaism and Hinduism. Not only does Geiger continually underscore Christianity’s historical debt to Judaism but he also claims that what he and his rationalist Protestant contemporaries see as problematic aspects of Christianity—such as asceticism and literal belief in the incarnation and resurrection of Christ—derive from elements foreign to Judaism. Christianity, therefore, in Geiger’s eyes, is at best an imitation of the moral elements of Judaism and at worst a complete distortion of Judaism: “What could be added to the saying of Hillel: ‘The Merciful inclineth the scale toward

³⁴ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol 5, P. 19

³⁵ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol 5, p. 345

³⁶ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol 5, p. 11

³⁷ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol 1, p. 383

mercy?’ If Jesus’ utterances concerning the purely moral relations of men to each other are indeed faithfully reported, they...present nothing new.”³⁸ Vivekananda’s rationalist reconstruction of Hinduism similarly links his claims about Hinduism’s fundamentally rational and moral qualities: “I do not believe in a God or a religion which cannot wipe the widow’s tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan’s mouth. However sublime be the theories, however well-spun may be the philosophy—I do not call it religion so long as it is confined to books and dogmas.”³⁹ For both Geiger and Vivekananda, the irrationality of Christian dogma is linked to what each regard as Christianity’s moral shortcomings.

Geiger and Vivekananda argue that Christian intolerance towards Jewish and Hindu particularism uncovers Christianity’s philosophical and moral shortcomings. Both reject Christian claims to universalism, arguing instead that Judaism and Hinduism respectively are truly universal not despite but rather by virtue of their particularity. For both, the distinctiveness of language and nationality do not detract from universalism but are prerequisites for them. Characterizing Christian universalism as “vagueness” and “mere phantoms which deny all real life,” Geiger contends that “The strength of Judaism lies precisely in the fact that it has grown out of a full national life and that it possess both a language and a history as a nation... if it was not to be a drifting shadow, it had to find expression in a healthy national individualism which, on the one hand, saw all of mankind epitomized within itself, but, on the other hand, sought to embrace all of the world of mankind beyond its own confines.”⁴⁰ And just as Geiger celebrates Hebrew as a classical language on par with Greek, Vivekananda lauds Sanskrit as “a great sacred language of which all others would be considered as manifestations.”⁴¹

More pointedly, Geiger and Vivekananda contend that historical Christian violence towards Jews and Hindus exposes the lie at the heart of Christian claims to universalism and tolerance. For Geiger, “Because it always had to engage in violent struggle [to preserve its own identity in the face of Christian hostility], Judaism remained a closed and separate entity; and yet it succeeded in transmitting its basic ideals to mankind as a universal heritage. And when the artificial barriers fall, it will continue to retain its universality throughout the course of history.”⁴² Again, for Geiger, Judaism’s universal heritage is the monotheistic idea that there is one God for all of humankind. This monotheistic idea, what Geiger calls elsewhere Judaism’s “religious genius,” affirms both God’s distinctiveness from humanity as well as the distinctiveness within humanity. True universalism for Geiger does not erase but rather encourages human differences, as described in Isaiah 19:24-25: “In that day shall Israel be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.’”

³⁸ Geiger, p. 133.

³⁹ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* Vol. 5, p. 39

⁴⁰ Geiger, pp. 151-152; Vivekananda: p. 398 “Every religion contains some rules regarding the taking of certain foods, and the avoiding of others; only Christianity is an exception.”

⁴¹ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* , vol 4, p. 255

⁴² Geiger, p 152.

Vivekananda's critique of Christian intolerance is even sharper than Geiger's: "India is the only country that never went outside of itself to conquer... The great emperor Askoka insisted that none of his descendants should go to conquer. If people want to send us teachers, let them help, but not injure. Why should all these people come to conquer the Hindus? Did they do any injury to any nation? What little good they could do they did for the world. They taught it science, philosophy, religion, and civilized the savage hordes of the earth. And this is the return—only murder and tyranny, and calling them heathen radicals."⁴³ The notion that there is only one religion, and only one way to worship God, is the basis of Vivekananda's criticism of Christian universalism and tolerance. Like Geiger, Vivekananda contends that universal ideals can only be articulated through particular expressions of these ideals. To claim otherwise, as Christian missionaries do, is to violently impose one particular religious expression—the Christian one—onto others. As Vivekananda concisely puts it: "Our fundamental idea is that your doctrine cannot be mine, or mine yours. Each one must have his own way."⁴⁴ For Vivekananda, the unity or universalism of humankind emerges not in spite but by virtue of human diversity.

Where does this brief comparison of Geiger and Vivekananda leave us? As noted above, there are significant differences between the two. Most notably, Geiger rejected the notion of Jewish nationhood, arguing instead that Jews would be loyal citizens of the German state. Vivekananda, in contrast, affirmed the connection between the Hindu religion and the Hindu nation. These were one and the same for him. Yet Vivekananda's more blatant criticism of Christianity, and in particular the Christian aspiration that everyone should be Christian, is instructive for appreciating this same concern within Geiger's project. As Deborah Hertz has exhaustively shown, the Jewish Reform movement in 19th century Germany was not only an attempt to offer a rational reconceptualization of Judaism in keeping with modernity but it was as fundamentally an attempt to stave off the growing rates of German-Jewish conversion to Christianity. After they were emancipated by Napoleon's defeat of Prussia in 1812, Jews were in theory full citizens of the Prussian state. Yet this ideal never became a reality in Prussia. Instead, it soon became clear that unless they converted to Christianity, Jews would remain second-class citizens at best. Internal Jewish reforms of Judaism were an attempt to offer Jews an alternative to conversion. This alternative is something that Prussian officials recognized and for this reason the Prussian state sought to shut down Jewish reform. As Hertz puts it:

Many [Prussian officials]...saw reform as a perilous enterprise designed to keep Jews from converting... In the 1820s and '30s, the [traditionalist] rabbis and [Prussian] officials both opposed reform, but they did so for completely opposite reasons. The officials feared that successful reform would lower conversion rates.... In their view, reform and conversion were alternative paths away from traditional Judaism. If Jews could alter Jewish rituals, they might be less likely to convert. So their [Prussian

⁴³ Vivekananda, *The Vedanta Philosophy*, http://www.vivekananda.net/PDFBooks/The_Vedanta_Philosophy.pdf, p. 26

⁴⁴ *The Vedanta Philosophy*, p. 20

officials'] policy was to close down reform so as to stimulate more conversions. The rabbis, in contrast...viewed reform as one step away from tradition, and baptism as a further step on that same path.... most reformers were lay activists, whose analysis was the same as the officials': that reform would be an alternative to conversion.⁴⁵

Just as Christian missionaries in 19th century India aimed to eradicate Hinduism, so too the Prussian state, despite its ostensible commitment to the equality of all of its citizens, aimed to eliminate Judaism. As Hertz points out, "The reformers and the rabbis were not the only observers aware that conversion rates were spiking upwards in dramatic fashion. [As one Prussian official,] Friedrich Leopold von Schrötter remarked in 1800 that if conversion continued at its current pace 'there would be no Judaism' in twenty years."⁴⁶

Despite their criticisms of Christianity, Geiger and the Jewish reformers of 19th century Germany remained optimistic that Jews and Judaism could exist in harmony with the modern nation state so long as Jews and their Protestant contemporaries properly understood that Judaism was rational and wholly compatible with the modern nation state. One might understand the origins of Zionism as the result of the failure of this effort. By the late 19th century, Zionists would come to argue that it was clear that Jews would never be accepted as equals in Christian Europe. But as we will see in the next chapter, as much as Zionism rejected the liberal, political structure that framed Geiger's vision, Zionism remained animated by ambivalence about conversion. While we should not underestimate the significant differences between Hindus living in colonial India in the 19th century and Jews living in Germany during the same time, our brief comparison between Geiger and Vivekananda shows that in both cases Christian imperialism continued to threaten the possibilities of Jewish and Hindu identities—even, if not especially, within the circle of Jewish and Hindu intellectuals who were most invested in synthesizing their own traditions with the rational, scientific progress of the west.

Conclusion: Back to America

Let us return to 19th century America, and particularly to the first Parliament of World Religions that took place in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda is credited with presenting Hinduism to America at the Parliament. And according to the Parliament's website, Vivekananda's speech "is memorized by school children in India to this day."⁴⁷ The Jewish delegation's presentation of Judaism to the Parliament was perhaps less significant to its American audience, though American Jews certainly perceived it as an important moment to clear up "popular errors about the Jews" and to take their pride of place in American society. Describing the Parliament's aim, the Presbyterian minister, John Henry Barrows (1847-1902), the President of the Parliament, stated that: "The solemn charge which the Parliament preaches to all true believers is a return to the primitive unity of the world." Subsequent World Parliaments of Religion, and

⁴⁵ Deborah Hertz, *How Jews Became Germans: The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin*, (Yale UP, 2007), p. 191.

⁴⁶ Hertz, p. 133

⁴⁷ <https://parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/chicago-1893/general-information>

subsequent interpreters, have taken Barrows' charge as the beginnings of worldwide interreligious dialogue. Yet by way of conclusion, I'd like to suggest that Christian missionizing was one of the subtexts of the Parliament and that this was not lost on either Vivekananda or the Jewish delegates in attendance.

Upon assuming the presidency of Oberlin College in 1899, Barrows published a book based on his travels throughout Asia in 1897. The title of the book is telling—*The Christian Conquest of Asia*. Although Barrows credits the 1893 World Parliament for making the “religions of the Orient” “more real and less vague,”⁴⁸ he is clear that his pursuit of religious “unity” means the conversion of the world to Christianity. Summing up his conclusions in the preface to the book he writes: “I do not cherish any expectations of the swift evangelization of countries where such proud and tough-fibred religions as Mohammedanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism have long held sway; but there are many evidences that...when Christendom is more thoroughly unified and Christianized, and pursue its aggressive missionary work with more wisdom and sympathy...the acceptance of the Christian Gospel will be far more wide and rapid.”⁴⁹ As we see, Barrows' call to unity is in keeping with the very conceptions of Christian universalism and tolerance that Geiger and Vivekananda criticized, discussed above. Again, Barrows' title is telling—religious unity for him means conquest. And while his book is about the Christian conquest of Asia, Barrow grounds his claims for conversion in the first chapter, entitled “Beginnings at Jerusalem; Or, Christianity and Judaism,” by way an argument about the need for Jews to convert to Christianity

The relationship between the Parliament's quest for unity and Christian missionizing seems to have been clear to Vivekananda. Although his speech at the World Parliament was and continues to be touted as an exemplary plea for religious commonality, we can also see that the speech contains a critique of Christian conceptions of unity. In Vivekananda's words:

Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But if any one here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, 'Brother, yours is an impossible hope.' Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant.

Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each

⁴⁸ John Barrows, *The Christian Conquest of Asia*, <https://archive.org/details/thechristianconq00barruoft>, p. xi

⁴⁹ *The Christian Conquest of Asia*, p. x

must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

The key point here is that each “preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.” As we saw above, for Vivekananda the preservation of individuality is what constitutes true tolerance.

The Jewish delegates to the World Parliament were Geiger’s spiritual and intellectual heirs. While extolling the unprecedented freedoms enjoyed by Jews in the United States, they too felt the need to insist on Judaism’s right to preserve itself against the attempted conquests of Christian missionaries. As Yaacov Ariel has shown, from the 1880s onward Christian evangelizing of Jews in America increased significantly.⁵⁰ Even while applauding the Parliament’s goals, the Jewish delegates to the World Parliament seized on this theme. As one delegate, Rabbi Joseph Silverman, put it, “The meager results achieved by missionaries and tracts have proved how futile are all efforts to convert the Jews. And even those few who have changed their faith have done so, there is ample reason to believe, only through mercenary motives, only because abject poverty forced them to accept the bribe that was temptingly held out toward them.”⁵¹ In contrast to Christian evangelizing, Silverman added, “The Jew is tolerant by nature, tolerant by virtue of his religious teaching. He believes in allowing every man, what he claims for himself, the right to work out his own salvation and make his own peace with God.”⁵²

Just as Warder Cresson stood between ancestry and belief when he converted to Judaism in the mid-19th century, so did Vivekananda and the Jewish delegates to the World Parliament of Religions at the end of the 19th century. As we will see in the next chapters, as the 19th century would give way to the 20th, anxiety about conversion in Jewish and Hindu reformers’ simultaneously apologetic and subversive religious enterprises would, in different ways, become an animating problem for projects of Jewish and Indian nationalism.

⁵⁰ Yaacov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁵¹ Rabbi Joseph Silverman, “Popular Errors about the Jews,” *Comprising the Papers on Judaism Read at the Parliament, at the Jewish Denominational Congress, and at the Jewish Presentation* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1894), p. 293.

⁵² *Comprising the Papers on Judaism Read at the Parliament, at the Jewish Denominational Congress, and at the Jewish Presentation*, pp. 293-294.