

## KANT ON THE JEWS AND THEIR RELIGION

– Wojciech Kozyra –

**Abstract:** The main focus of the article is the analysis of Kant’s notion of Judaism and his attitude toward the Jewish nation in a new context. Kant’s views on the Jewish religion are juxtaposed with those of Mendelssohn and Spinoza in order to emphasize several interesting features of Kant’s political and religious thought. In particular, the analysis shows that, unlike Mendelssohn, Kant did not consider tolerance to be the last word of the enlightened state in matters of its coexistence with religion. The author also argues that Kant’s fascination with Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* was premature and that his later disappointment with Mendelssohn’s persistent adherence to Jewish orthodoxy reflects his understanding of the condition of Judaism in the context of the new era of Enlightenment. Moreover, the paper addresses in a novel way the relevant connections between Kant and Spinoza, showing substantive similarities between their notions of Judaism and Christianity, and provides an overview of Kant’s historical involvement with Jewish issues, which are significant given the argumentative structure of the article.

**Keywords:** Kant, Mendelssohn, Spinoza, Judaism, Christianity, state-church separation thesis, religious pluralism, Enlightenment, *Haskalah*.

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In this article I discuss Kant’s conception of Judaism and his attitudes toward the Jewry of his time. In the first and second part of the text I analyse the historical material concerning the direct connections between Kant and his Jewish contemporaries and present his view on the Jewish nation as such. I highlight Kant’s ambivalent attitude to this nation – like many other Enlightenment figures, he praised and encouraged the Jews inclined towards assimilation, but at the same time shared the prejudices of his period with respect to Jewish people in general.

In parts three and four I deal with the depiction of the Jewish religion in Kant’s writings. I compare it with the views of Spinoza and Mendelssohn from the *Theological-Political Treatise* and *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*, respectively. Through this juxtaposition I hope to show some interesting and thus far largely unrecognized connections between the conceptions of those three authors. In particular, I show the existence of substantive similarities between Kant’s and Spinoza’s notion of Judaism

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and Christianity and argue that Kant and Mendelssohn have significantly different ideas about what constitutes the ultimate aim of the Enlightenment politics with respect to Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Kant and the Jews

The above subtitle could as well read “Kant and *maskilim*” (i.e. Jewish enlighteners) because, naturally, it is this segment of the Jewish population to which Kant was exposed. I begin with a brief discussion of Kant’s relationship with the most famous *maskil*, the precursor of the Jewish Enlightenment (i.e. the *Haskalah*), Moses Mendelssohn.

The personal relationship between Kant and Mendelssohn was marked by mutual respect. In 1777 Mendelssohn visited Kant in Königsberg and “honoured” Kant’s lectures with his presence.<sup>2</sup> There is a story connected with this, according to which Kant was to stave off the anti-Jewish grumblings that “welcomed” Mendelssohn at the University of Königsberg.<sup>3</sup> In turn, the earliest documented case of an interaction between Kant and Mendelssohn is Kant’s letter from February 1766 (15 years before the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*) in which this “great destroyer in the republic of thought” (trans. W.K.)<sup>4</sup> – as Kant was later called by Heinrich Heine – reports to Mendelssohn that a Mendel Koshmann introduced to him Mendelssohn’s *protégé*,<sup>5</sup> a Jewish student named Leon, whom Kant let attend his lectures and whom he also “provided with other services” (trans. W.K.).<sup>6</sup> What is interesting for us and what proves that Kant had contacts with the Königsberg Jewish community is that he informs Mendelssohn about Leon’s disobedience toward the Jewish authorities in Königsberg in the aforementioned letter.<sup>7</sup>

In the same letter Kant submits to Mendelssohn his work *Träume eines Geistersehers* (“Dreams of a Spirit-Seer”) to the latter’s judgement. In the subsequent letter from April 1766, Kant discusses at length the current state and the future of metaphysics. In this period Kant was already thinking about a possible reform of metaphysics, eventually brought about by the *Critique of Pure Reason* published in 1781. In the letter from April 1766 Kant expresses his disapproval at the state of metaphysics at the time and proclaims the need to undertake its fundamental reform. Moreover, he notes that if he and Mendelssohn joined forces in this endeavour, “the development of science might be significantly advanced.”<sup>8</sup> However, such an alliance never took place – until his death Mendelssohn kept on refining Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy, while Kant took the path

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<sup>1</sup> In the following sections I quote Kant in accordance with the *Akademie Ausgabe* and include English translations in the bibliography. My own translations are marked in the text and the original is referenced in footnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Br 10:211.

<sup>3</sup> Dietzsch (2003): 167–168.

<sup>4</sup> “... große Zerstörer im Reiche der Gedanken” (Heine (1997): 94). In fact, Mendelssohn himself mentions the “all-quashing Kant” in his late writings (see Mendelssohn (2011a): xix; cf. also Sorkin (2012): 251–254).

<sup>5</sup> There is also an opposite case in which Kant recommends a Jewish physician Aron Isaac Joel to Mendelssohn (Br 10:68).

<sup>6</sup> “Ich habe ihm ... andere Dienstleistungen zugestanden” (Br 10:68).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Br 10:91.

of transcendental idealism and – to refer again to Heine’s words – became “the great destroyer in the republic of thought,” the republic of which Mendelssohn was one of the most prominent citizens.<sup>9</sup> This, however, did not significantly worsen the relationship between the two philosophers.

Mendelssohn’s essential claim about the compatibility of the Jewish law with the general culture of the Enlightenment (which I will discuss in more detail in subsequent sections) was a characteristic feature of the first generation of the German *Haskalah*, which – apart from Mendelssohn – includes figures like Hartwig Wessely, Issak Satanow, Marcus Elieser Bloch and Salomon Dubno. However, the second generation of German *maskilim* – David Friedländer, Lazarus Bendavid, Saul Ascher, Marcus Herz, Isaak Euchel, Salomon Maimon – chose a different path than their predecessors and turned in the direction of Kant’s philosophy.<sup>10</sup> The successors of Mendelssohn did not perceive the Talmud and *Halakha* (i.e. the Jewish law) as legitimate sources of obligations of the divine origin. Rather, their written works suggest that the Jewish ritual is an obstacle on the way to enlightenment and citizenship. As Kant’s student, Marcus Herz, wrote to his teacher in 1770:

It is you alone that I must thank for my change of fortune, and to you alone am I indebted for what I am; without you I would still be like so many of my kinsmen pursuing a life chained to the wagon of prejudices, a life no better than that of any animal. I would have a soul without powers, an understanding without efficacy, in short, without you I would be that which I was four years ago, in other words I would be nothing.<sup>11</sup>

Herz (son of a Jewish scribe) depicts in his letter the rabbinic law as a collection of “prejudices” and considers his liberation from it to be a “lucky<sup>12</sup> change of fortune” which he owes to Kant. Moreover, he claims that the life of strict observance of the rabbinic law is unworthy of man, being on a par with the life of an animal. Moses Hirschel also complained that *Halakha* (the “*Machtwerk*”<sup>13</sup> of the rabbis) was the main hindrance in the process of the Jewish *Verbürgerlichung*. In addition, he claimed that the “superstitious” rabbinic elite was responsible for the persecution of and contempt for the Jews and that Jewish orthodoxy should be brought before the “pure critique of reason.”<sup>14</sup> In turn, Lazarus Bendavid, another *maskil* of the second generation, thought that rabbinic Judaism arose from a wrong interpretation of the destruction of the Temple as punishment for sins and hence, because of its compensative nature, its history is a history of disease.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mendelssohn persistently tried to defend orthodox metaphysics against Kant’s (and others’) attacks (see Gottlieb (2011): 85–92; Arkush (1994): 37–45). Still, it does not mean that Mendelssohn did not manage to influence Kant in an important respect in the field of theoretical philosophy (see Sorokin (2012): 91–92).

<sup>10</sup> In his work on *Haskalah* Christoph Schulte devotes a whole chapter to the question of the connection between Kant and the *maskilim* (Schulte (2002): 157–169).

<sup>11</sup> Br 10:99–100.

<sup>12</sup> In the German original the word “change” is preceded by the adjective *glückliche* (Br 10:100).

<sup>13</sup> Hirschel (1788): 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem: 19.

<sup>15</sup> Schulte (2002): 111–113.

As I have already shown with the example of Herz's letter, Kant was in contact with the representatives of the second generation of the *Haskalah* and it was Herz with whom he developed the strongest bond.<sup>16</sup> When Kant finally obtained the professorship of logic and metaphysics in 1770 that he had long wished for and when he had to deliver a professorial dissertation upon receiving it, he appointed Herz as his defendant. This decision – due to Herz's Jewishness – did not go unnoticed in the circles of Albertina.<sup>17</sup> Another example of Kant's positive attitude towards a representative of the Jewry of the period is provided by the case of his other student, Isaac Euchel.<sup>18</sup> At the beginning of 1786 there was a vacancy at Königsberg University for a professorship in Hebrew and Kant recommended Euchel for this post (to no effect). As the dean of the philosophical faculty, Kant wrote the following in his report to the vice-rector:

The Philosophical Faculty, especially its current Dean, cannot refuse Abraham Isaac Euchel a laudable testimony of his good morals, his diligence, as well as knowledge he acquired in the sciences, and is far from impeding or rejecting his request for the reasons of intolerance [trans. W.K.].<sup>19</sup>

Also, in his earlier letter to the philosophical faculty, Kant argued that the fact that the appointment of Euchel – because of his Jewishness – “is unusual is no objection, since it is also unusual that our university should for an extended period of time be lacking instruction in a necessary subject.”<sup>20</sup> It is worth adding that the description of Hebrew as a “necessary” subject at a Protestant university is not merely rhetorical – Hebrew, in Kant's time, was part of the Protestant curriculum<sup>21</sup> and Kant himself was taught this language when he attended Collegium Fridericianum. One preserved account even says that Kant was awarded a “medal” by the Jewish community of Königsberg for his help in interpreting the Talmud.<sup>22</sup> The story is not entirely unlikely – after all, in *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant mentions the “subtle Jewish art of exegesis.”<sup>23</sup> It is conceivable, then, that those “other services” which Kant provided to Mendelssohn's *protégé* involved interpreting.

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<sup>16</sup> Dietzsch (2003): 134.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem: 109.

<sup>18</sup> Euchel co-founded the *Ha-Massef* (Ger. *der Sammler*), the first Hebrew journal in Germany, and authored Mendelssohn's biography in Hebrew. Shmuel Finer stresses the critical importance of Euchel in the process of creating the institutions of *Haskalah* (Feiner (2010): 184).

<sup>19</sup> “Die Philosophische Facultaet, insbesondere der jetzige Dechant derselben kann gedachtem Abraham Isaac Euchel ein rühmliches Zeugnis wegen seiner guten Sitten, seines Fleißes imgleichen allerley in Wissenschaften erworbenen Kenntniß, nicht verweigern, und ist überdem weit entfernt, aus intoleranten Grundsätzen ihm sein Gesuch abzuschlagen oder zu erschweren” (see Kennecke (2007): 90).

<sup>20</sup> Br 12:427.

<sup>21</sup> Schulte (2002): 41–42.

<sup>22</sup> Julius Guttmann writes: “so lebhaft müssen die Beziehungen Kants zu Jüdischen Kreisen gewesen sei, dass einst, als seine Hörerschaft ihm eine Medaille als Zeichen ihrer Verehrung überreichte, das Gerücht aufkam ... die Königsberger Judenschaft habe Kant in dieser den Dank dafür abstatten wollen, dass er ihr in die Erklärung schwieriger Talmudstellen behilflich gewesen sei” (Guttman (1908): 46). The story had been denounced by Michael Friedländer (see Stangneth (2001): 51–52), but it still seems to be an open question whether this denunciation did not have a debunking, ideological, and anti-Talmudic motif.

<sup>23</sup> SF 7:66.

An example of Kant's relationships – on the philosophical plane – with a Jewish *Aufklärer* that is most often evoked is his interaction with Salomon Maimon, a Polish *maskil* born in Niasvich (today's Belarus) who had made his way into the intellectual circles of Berlin.

In 1789 Kant received Maimon's manuscript which appeared a year later under the title *Versuch über die Transcendentalphilosophie* ("Essay on Transcendental Philosophy"). In a letter to Herz from May 1789 Kant famously informs his former pupil that nobody understood his philosophy as well as Maimon.<sup>24</sup> However, Kant refused to write a recommendation for Maimon's book because, as he claimed, the book was directed against his philosophy. It is of interest that in his letter to Herz, after he deemed Maimon the ablest of his critics, Kant made a note that his opinion was not meant for publicity and in a later letter from February 1790 to one of his popularizers, J.G.C.Ch. Kiesewetter, he claimed that he did not have time to read Maimon's book.<sup>25</sup> He wrote this in response to Kiesewetter's correspondence, in which the latter reported that he did not manage to read far into the *Versuche*, but the level of familiarity with the book he nevertheless achieved allows him to recognize that he disagrees with its contents. Kiesewetter also spoke pejoratively of Maimon's appearance and manner of speech.<sup>26</sup>

It is therefore rather clear that Kant wanted to keep his praise of Maimon's work secret from his Protestant peers. One has to admit that if Maimon hoped Kant would become his patron in the same way that Mendelssohn found a patron in G.E. Lessing, then little came of it.

## 2. Kant and the Jewish nation

The symptom of Kant's duplicity noted above finds further confirmation when we look at his correspondence with a Protestant proselyte and the most prominent exponent of Kant's ideas, Karl Leonard Reinhold. In a letter to Reinhold from 1794 Kant refers in a derogatory fashion to the Maimonian "improvement" of critical philosophy and adds in parenthesis that the "Jews always like ... to gain an air of importance for themselves at someone else's expense."<sup>27</sup> This is a clear reference to Maimon, who allegedly wanted to build his reputation by contesting Kant's philosophy. In turn, in an earlier letter to Reinhold from 1789, while commenting on his portrait authored by a Jewish artist, Kant notes that he looks like a Jew and explains it by saying that the "Jew always paints people to look like Jews. And the proof of this is found in the nose."<sup>28</sup> Outside Kant's

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<sup>24</sup> Br 11:49.

<sup>25</sup> Kant (1986): 940. This letter is mentioned in both works, but is not itself included in either the *Akademie Ausgabe* or in the English translation of Kant's correspondence by Arnulf Zweig. Here I use the edition of Kant's correspondence published in 1986 by Felix Meiner and edited by Joachim Kopper and Rudolf Malter.

<sup>26</sup> Br 11:112–117. It should be noted, however, to Kant's credit, that in his answer to Kiesewetter he expressed the hope that Kiesewetter would not be disheartened with Maimon and would keep developing his acquaintance with him, because – as Kant says – one can expect originality and autonomy in thinking from such autodidacts like the author of the *Versuche* (Kant (1986): 940).

<sup>27</sup> Br 11:494–495.

<sup>28</sup> Br 11:33. To be precise, Kant repeats here what he claims to have heard from "a man who knows painting" (*ibidem*).

private correspondence (which, by the way, Kant did not want to be published),<sup>29</sup> an often quoted example of Kant's anti-Jewish sentiment comes from the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* where Kant writes that the "Palestinians living among us ... or at least a great majority of them, have earned not unfounded reputation of being cheaters" and continues to explain that:

Admittedly it seems strange to think of a *nation* of cheaters; but it is just as strange to think of a nation of nothing but merchants, the far greater majority of whom are bound by an ancient superstition recognized by the state they live in, seek no civil honour, but rather wish to replace their loss through the advantage of the outwitting of the people under whom they find protection, and even one another. It cannot be otherwise with the entire nation of nothing but merchants as non-productive members of society ...<sup>30</sup>

However, in the context of the above statement what often escapes attention is that Kant ends his elaboration with the assertion that takes the *odium theologicum* off the Jewish people – he writes that "their [the Jews'] dispersion throughout the world, with the unity of religion and language must not be attributed to a *curse* inflicted on these people [so, by the same token, the destruction of the Temple should not be "attributed to a curse" – W.K.] but rather to a blessing ..."<sup>31</sup> According to Kant, this is so because the dispersion allowed the Jews to build their wealth on global trade. One must note here that Kant – at least on the level of philosophical reflection – held a positive view of "the spirit of commerce, which cannot coexist with war," seeing it as instrumental in the process of achieving a stable state of worldwide peace.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, since Kant apparently thinks that the Jews form a major trade force in the world, he, by his own lights, has to reach the conclusion that no other nation than the Jews works – wittingly or not – harder towards "perpetual peace."

This, of course, in no way eliminates the negative tone of the fragment from the *Anthropology* cited above. In a similar way, Kant was to express himself in the presence of a theologian Johann Fridrich Abegg; he reportedly said that "as long as Jews – are Jews and circumcised, they will never become more useful than harmful in civil society. Now they are vampires in society."<sup>33</sup> After stressing that to call the Jews "vampires" does not square with Kant's rather temperate language and is better suited to the phraseology of Romanticism (close to Abegg himself), we should notice that in both fragments quoted above we can see complaints about the unproductivity of the Jews in the modern state (typical of the Enlightenment), which was said to be caused by the authority of religious, communal and legal institutions over the Jewish people.

In this context, before we diagnose Kant – as Léon Poliakov did in his seminal *Histoire de l'antisémitisme* ("History of Anti-Semitism") – with particularly "visceral

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<sup>29</sup> Zweig (1999): 1.

<sup>30</sup> Anth 7:206–207.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> ZeF 8:368–369.

<sup>33</sup> See Kaufmann (2009): 124. Karl Vorländer, a prominent Kant scholar and biographer, considered this statement the strongest among all of Kant's anti-Jewish episodes (ibidem).

hostility” towards the Jews,<sup>34</sup> we should be reminded of what Marcin Wodziński thinks is worth remembering, namely that “even very critical statements and attitudes toward the traditional Jewish community from this period were normal occurrences within the tradition of the Enlightenment [trans. W.K.]”<sup>35</sup> Wodziński further enumerates “coercive productivization, radical changes in education, undermining the communal authority ... fight with the separatism of attire and language, etc. [trans. W.K.]”<sup>36</sup> as postulates making up the program of such Polish *maskilim* as Jacques Calmanson, Abraham Buchner, Antoni Eisenbaum or Abraham Stern. As we have already seen, the German *maskilim* of the second generation also did not identify themselves with the Halakhic Jewry (and still less with Hasidic tzaddikism, which is evident from David Friedländer’s later anti-Hasidic activities) and saw it as a “history of the disease” (Bendavid), an “animal” form of life (Herz) or the main cause of the persecution of the Jewish people (Hirschel). One can also add to this a thesis of Lazarus Bendavid – considered by Kant to be a “highly intelligent Jew”<sup>37</sup> – who claimed in *Etwas zur Charakteristik der Juden* from 1793 that the orthodox Jews are lost to the Enlightenment and one can only wait until they die out.<sup>38</sup>

Using the art of extrapolation one can learn from the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the instinct which inclines us towards homogenising the motivating factors which stand behind complex attitudes and acts of human beings is not a reliable guide. In light of the foregoing considerations, it is difficult to construct a unified narrative when describing Kant’s attitude towards the Jews. His attitude to the individual *maskilim* was favourable and – as the above examples show – Kant dared to manifest publicly his respect and appreciation toward the representatives of the *Haskalah* movement. This appreciation was expressed by Kant not only on the plane of mores, as was the case with Mendelssohn, but also at the institutional level, demonstrated by his attitude towards Herz and, above all, Euchel. In this context, his ambivalent attitude towards Maimon might be perhaps understood (which does not mean “justified”) by pointing to the outstanding austerity of this remarkable *Ostjude*. However, Kant’s treatment of the Jews as a nation clearly betrays a mindset characteristic of the intellectual elites of his time. For Kant – as well as for a significant part of the late *Haskalah* – the halakhic Jewry must, sooner or later, give way to the moral religion of reason proclaimed by the Enlightenment – and as long as it is not willing to do so, it exposes itself to the blade of ideological criticism. To the philosophy of it I now turn.

### 3. Judaism: Kant and Spinoza

As Julius Guttman noticed in *Kant und das Judentum*, Kant – although “otherwise an original thinker”<sup>39</sup> – remains fundamentally imitative in his views on Judaism. Guttman claims that Kant’s rendition of the Jewish religion is taken from Spinoza’s *Theo-*

<sup>34</sup> Poliakov (1981): 82.

<sup>35</sup> Wodziński (2003): 48: “nawet bardzo krytyczne wobec tradycyjnej społeczności żydowskiej postawy i wypowiedzi z tego czasu mieściły się w normach tradycji oświeceniowej.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem: “przymusową produktywizację, radykalne zmiany w systemie oświaty, likwidację władzy kahalnej ... walkę z separatyzmem stroju i języka itd.”

<sup>37</sup> SF 7:53.

<sup>38</sup> “Sie [i.e. orthodox Jews – W.K.] wird immer und ewig unverbesserlich bleiben, und ihr Aussterben ist die einzige Hoffnung für die Nachkommenschaft” (Bendavid (1792): 46–47).

<sup>39</sup> Guttman (1908): 50–51.

*logical-Political Treatise*.<sup>40</sup> Before I take a closer look at this thesis, I will present Spinoza's conception of Judaism, which, regardless of the actual genesis of Kant's views, puts them in a suitable context.

For Spinoza, the Jewish ritual does not constitute a *religious* community proper, but amounts to a state law promulgated by Moses (*qua* political sovereign)<sup>41</sup> to the Jewish nation taken as a *political* community. Given this view, *Halakha* is only a collection of positive laws being "shaped by the form and constitution of one particular state and adapted to the character of a single people"<sup>42</sup> while aiming at "this worldly well-being which is honour or fame, victory, wealth, pleasure and health."<sup>43</sup> By the same token, Spinoza depicts the Jewish ceremonial law as binding only in particular historical circumstances, which had ceased to take place after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD.<sup>44</sup> In consequence, together with the demolition of the Jewish polity, the Jewish law lost its binding force while the ongoing observance of it by the Jews became deprived of its rationale. The negative attitude of Spinoza toward the *Halakha* often surfaces in the *Treatise*, especially when Spinoza contrasts ritual with reason. He says, e.g., that "the [ritual] Law was delivered only to those who lack reason and the lessons of natural understanding."<sup>45</sup> In turn, the life of the Jewish people under religious law amounts to a form of "slavery,"<sup>46</sup> from which the New Testament promises liberation: "God sent his Christ to all nations – says Spinoza – to free all men equally from the servitude of the law, so that they would no longer live good lives because the law so commanded, but from a fixed conviction of the mind."<sup>47</sup>

In this context, Spinoza notes that some of the Mosaic laws are nevertheless "propositionally" the same as the laws of reason, and writes:

Although these Five Books contain much about morality as well as ceremonies, morality is not to be found there as moral teachings universal to all men, but only as instructions uniquely adjusted to the understanding and character of the Hebrew nation, and therefore relevant to the prosperity of their state alone.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibidem. This claim is present also e.g. in Cohen (1910): 312; Graupe (1961): 317; Munk (2006): 217–218.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Schulte (2002): 52–53.

<sup>42</sup> Spinoza (2007): 53.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem: 69.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. ibidem: 68; cf. also Feiner (2010): 172.

<sup>45</sup> Spinoza (2007): 39.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem: 74, 224. This theme is also present in the works of Kant and Bendavid. In *Etwas zur Charakteristik der Juden* the latter mentions the "slavish mind" of orthodox Jews (see Bendavid (1793): 65). The same word, i.e. *Sklavensinn*, with the same reference is used by Kant in the *Religion*, published shortly after Bendavid's book (RGV 6:80).

<sup>47</sup> Spinoza (2007): 53. The apology of Christianity, often present in the *Treatise* (yet detested by Christian clergy), prompted Rousseau to observe that "this is the one book among all modern works which has been most denounced by the priests, though it is just the one from which they might have drawn the greatest number of arguments in favour of Christianity" (see Eckstein (1944): 269).

<sup>48</sup> Spinoza (2007): 69.



Spinoza further emphasises that this moral teaching was not meant by Moses to be a moral teaching: it did not refer to the “fixed conviction of the mind” (*consensu animi*),<sup>49</sup> which for Spinoza remained to be granted by Christ. Instead, Moses – as befits a political legislator – penalised only external behaviour, referring to the tariff of awards and punishments, and thereby to the “enslaving” affects of hope and fear.<sup>50</sup>

The Kantian conception of Judaism (and also of Christianity) is indeed very similar to that of Spinoza.<sup>51</sup> It should however be noted (fulfilling the promise given at the beginning of this section) that Kant’s views, rather than being taken from Spinoza (whom Kant “never studied”),<sup>52</sup> were particular to the Protestant tradition which Spinoza himself might have engaged with. What he arguably did, as Graeme Hunter argues (battling *en route* lingering beliefs about Spinoza’s intransigently antireligious position) in his recent *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza’s Thought*. Hunter notes that the themes we find in Spinoza include “a Protestant concern for the [moral] purity ... of Christianity,”<sup>53</sup> “a critique of Judaism ... based ... on an obviously Christian reading of the Jewish scriptures,”<sup>54</sup> Moses overlooking “the moral significance of the ... Decalogue,”<sup>55</sup> and the New Testament bringing “a universal religion to all mankind, regardless of cultural setting.”<sup>56</sup> Another Christian-Protestant element in Spinoza, as Christoph Schulte emphasises, is the theme depicting *Halakha* as Jewish state law. Already in 1525 Martin Luther described the Tora as the “Jewish Saxon Mirror”<sup>57</sup> – later, the expression “Moses, the lawgiver” became popular (to Mendelssohn’s unease)<sup>58</sup> in the circles of Protestant intelligentsia.<sup>59</sup> Ultimately, then, Kant did not have to reach beyond his immediate tradition to formulate his views on Judaism.<sup>60</sup> In the discussion that follows I will indicate to what a significant

<sup>49</sup> Edwin Curley translates it as a “constant decision of the heart” (Spinoza (2016): 122).

<sup>50</sup> Spinoza (2007): 69–70.

<sup>51</sup> Obviously, there is a difference in the general framework of their conceptions (God as nature in Spinoza and God as a postulate of practical reason in Kant), but a very similar problem surfaces in Spinoza alone. It concerns the problematic relation between Spinoza’s notion of religion and God from the *Ethics* (where Spinoza argues for the aforementioned *Deus sive natura*) and *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* where the philosopher seems to presuppose a much more traditional notion of divinity (Hunter (2017): 141–143). However, the relation between practical and theoretical philosophy – or between different aspects of practical philosophy – in Kant as well as in Spinoza – cannot be discussed within the scope of this article.

<sup>52</sup> “Kant hat mir gestanden, den Spinozismus niemals recht studiert zu haben.” This is what Johann Georg Hamann wrote in a letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (see Heman (1901): 276).

<sup>53</sup> Hunter (2017): 182.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*: 75.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*: 58.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*: 59. On top of it, Leo Strauss contends that “the chief aim of the *Treatise* is the liberation of Christianity from its Jewish heritage...” (Strauss (1988): 167).

<sup>57</sup> Schulte (2002): 55.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Mendelssohn (1782): xix.

<sup>59</sup> A good example of this narrative is the book “Commentary on the Laws of Moses” (*Mosaisches Recht*) written by Johann David Michaelis, a contemporary of Kant and one of the most important Protestant Hebrew scholars of the period.

<sup>60</sup> Tomasz Kupś writes that Kant must have also been acquainted with a radically naturalistic – and hence distant from his own views – *Fragments* by Hermann Samuel Reimarus, published after the death of its author by Lessing in the years 1774–1778 (Kupś (2008): 270). Josef Bohatec stresses some similarities between Kant’s and Reimarus’ notions of Judaism (Bohatec (1966): 463).

extent the “radically Protestant” attitude toward Judaism in Spinoza agrees with Kant’s understanding of it.<sup>61</sup>

Kant expressed his position concerning Judaism mainly in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) and in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). Apart from that, his statements about Judaism are scattered throughout his writings. Some of them are openly positive. For example, in the *Critique of Judgement* Kant writes: “Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc.’”<sup>62</sup> According to Kant, this prohibition of the sensible representation of the divine alone can explain the ongoing attachment of the Jews to their tradition, even after they had entered into the “civilised” phase of development.<sup>63</sup> This notwithstanding, Kant’s negative attitude towards Judaism due to its supposed exclusivism<sup>64</sup> seems to be constant throughout his life. As early as 1764, Kant writes in the *Remarks in the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* that “the law-giving power of God over the Jewish people is grounded in the social contract. God wanted to lead them out of Egypt and give them another country if they obeyed him.”<sup>65</sup> In this fragment we can see that the lawgiver of the Jewish nation, according to Kant, is not Moses (like for Spinoza) but God himself. However, this is said by Kant with a proviso that “at that time, he was not a God of human beings, but of the Jews.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, we deal here with God as the legislator of a particular community. God plays the role of political sovereign who provides his people with the means of establishing a sovereign state in exchange for obedience. Obviously, this contract is conditional in nature – it is valid only as long as God secures territorial sovereignty for the Jews.<sup>67</sup> Given this, Kant, like Spinoza, claims that together with the demolition of the Jewish state, *Halakha* – the Jewish state law – loses its validity.<sup>68</sup>

These ideas are developed further in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, where Kant pictures Judaism in a way very similar to Spinoza. Kant writes that in “Jewish theocracy” the subjects were attuned exclusively to the achievement of temporal goods

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<sup>61</sup> For example, Shlomo Pines and Anna Tomaszewska have recently argued for the existence of commonalities between Kant’s and Spinoza’s philosophy of religion. While Pines discloses a significant resemblance between Kant’s theory of postulates and Spinoza’s seven-dogmas conception from the *Tractatus* (Pines (1997)), Tomaszewska links Kant to Spinoza *via* Johann Christian Edelmann (Tomaszewska (2020): 129–131) and notes the “rationalist” attitude toward religion shared by Kant and Spinoza (Tomaszewska (2016a): 142).

<sup>62</sup> KU 5:274.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> Moritz Lazarus challenged this view in an interesting and well-informed fashion in Lazarus (1898): 144–183.

<sup>65</sup> HN 20:90.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>67</sup> RGV 6:107.

<sup>68</sup> The view that Kant’s criticism of Judaism as expressed in his mature writings is only a smokescreen for his criticism of Christianity, necessitated by the reactionary political climate (for this claim see e.g. Graupe (1961)), I consider insufficiently evidenced. Kant’s criticism of the Jewish religion dates back before the *Religionsschrift* and we have Kant’s explicit declaration, in which he claims that although he may not have the courage to say everything he thinks, he certainly says nothing he does not believe (Br 10:69; cf. also Stangneth (2001): 30).

and national prosperity in accordance with a tariff of rewards and punishments.<sup>69</sup> Exactly like Spinoza, he recognises that the “burdensome” ritual laws did in fact include some moral principles “but only inasmuch as they gave rise to external compulsion, hence – Kant continues – were only civil, and the inferiority of the moral disposition was in no way at issue.”<sup>70</sup> In Spinoza, as noted above, we observe the very same scheme: Judaism is superseded by the moral religion of Jesus which was brought by him to “all nations” (hence universalism) and who called for conducting a good life “from a fixed conviction of the mind” (hence moral attitude) instead of being driven – as it happens in “political” and “this-worldly” Judaism – by incentives which Kant would call “heteronomous.”<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Spinoza stresses the particular importance of the moral *action*, which is attested by his preference – which he shares with Kant<sup>72</sup> – of James’ works over Pauline faith.<sup>73</sup>

Thus Kant and Spinoza agree on the civil-political nature of *Halakha*, however – as I have said – their opinions differ with regard to what can be considered a relevant legislative instance. For Spinoza it is ultimately Moses and for Kant – the God of the Old Testament. Kant never mentions the phrase “Moses, the lawgiver” and writes instead that the Laws of Moses constitute the “statutory will of God [trans. W.K.]”<sup>74</sup> and as such they can be accepted as postulates of a historically formed confession with the proviso, however, that they do not penetrate to the essence of religion as such, which is to be constituted by the moral laws of reason, transparent and intelligible to all human beings.<sup>75</sup> In this way, in the *Religion* the conception of Judaism as a peculiar form of a particularistic and political organization which is only “masquerading as religion”<sup>76</sup> becomes reaffirmed. We read in Kant’s *Religionsschrift*:

The *Jewish faith*, as originally established, was only a collection of merely statutory laws supporting a political state; for whatever moral additions were *appended* to it, whether originally or only later, do not in any way belong to Judaism as such.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> RGV 6:79–80.

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>71</sup> Spinoza’s commitment to the rational-moral autonomy (partially validated by Kisner (2011): 83 and Tomaszewska (2016b): 184) is confirmed, e.g., also by his claim that the person who acts just because he understands “the necessity of the laws ... is acting steadfastly and at his own and not another’s command, and therefore is deservedly called just.” On the other hand, one who is just only because he “fears the gallows” is, according to Spinoza, not truly just (Spinoza (2007): 58). Yet another example is provided by Spinoza’s “free man” from the *Ethics* who – for the sake of preserving his autonomy – would rather die than act deceitfully (Spinoza (1992): 192). Elsewhere (Kozyra (2018)) I discussed the affinity between Kant’s notion of *sittliche Gesinnung* and Spinoza’s *consensus animi* and, generally, attempted to challenge a popular perception of Spinoza as an “immoralist” and the antipode of Kant’s ethics. It is worth noting here that a significant contribution to the task of bridging the gap between Kant’s and Spinoza’s moral theory has been made by a joint publication edited by Ann Tillkorn *Motivationen für das Selbst – Spinoza und Kant im Vergleich* which contains a particularly important chapter by Manfred Walther (Walther (2008)).

<sup>72</sup> SF 7:66–67.

<sup>73</sup> Hunter (2017): 80.

<sup>74</sup> “Statutarischen göttlichen Willen” (VARGV 23:103).

<sup>75</sup> RGV 6:104.

<sup>76</sup> Rosenstock (2010): 191.

<sup>77</sup> RGV 6:125.

Given the categories of Kant's moral theory, such a view presents moral heteronomy (of a politico-legal kind) as an essential feature of the Jewish religion. In contrast, for Kant Christianity is founded on the autonomy of the moral disposition; he says that "Christianity has the great advantage over Judaism of being represented as coming from the mouth of the first teacher not as a statutory [like Judaism – W.K.] but as a moral religion"<sup>78</sup> and as such introduces "pure moral religion in place of an old [Jewish – W.K.] cult."<sup>79</sup> Of course, Kant does not describe the factual state of Christianity, which he admits is as statutory as Judaism or any other positive religion, but he means what Christianity is in its idea and that, according to Kant, is the universal religion of reason. On the other hand, Judaism for him is deprived of moral universality and *moralische Gesinnung* not only *de facto* but "*de iure*" as well, or, to use Bruce Rosenstock's metaphor, for Kant "both Judaism and historical Christianity fall on the side of hell, but ... only Judaism makes hell its preferred dwelling place."<sup>80</sup> I will return to this difference between Christianity and Judaism at the end of the article while discussing Saul Ascher's criticism of Kant's notion of Judaism.

For now let us focus on Kant's discussion of the adequate method of interpreting the Bible in the *Religion*, which is quite illuminating. In this context, I find the work of a contemporary Israeli philosopher, Moshe Halbertal, particularly helpful. In *The People of the Book* Halbertal argues that canonical religious texts (and not only these) put their interpreters under the obligation of using the "principle of charity" understood as a hermeneutical rule aiming at providing the most optimal reading of the given text possible.<sup>81</sup> Halbertal, however, notes subsequently that there are two diametrically opposed views regarding the source of the relevant criterion of optimality. One view is that this criterion is external to the text itself, and the second is that it is immanent to it.<sup>82</sup> Now let us look at the aforementioned case of the *Religion*.<sup>83</sup> Kant invokes the interpretation of Psalm 59 proposed by Johann David Michaelis. The relevant passage (according to the King James Bible) reads as follows:

The God of my mercy shall prevent me: God shall let me see my desire upon mine enemies. Slay them not, lest my people forget: scatter them by thy power; and bring them down, O Lord our shield. For the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips let them even be taken in their pride: and for cursing and lying which they speak. Consume them in wrath, consume them, that they may not be: and let them know that God ruleth in Jacob unto the ends of the earth. Selah. (Psalm 59: 10–13)

Michaelis' hermeneutics is an example of an "endogenous" interpretation of the canon, which links the principle of charity with the necessity of a literal interpretation of a canonical text, precisely because the text in question is canonical and as such is the

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<sup>78</sup> RGV 6:167.

<sup>79</sup> RGV 6:127.

<sup>80</sup> Rosenstock (2010): 187.

<sup>81</sup> Halbertal (1997): 11–40.

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem: 27–40.

<sup>83</sup> This example is also discussed in Kupś (2008): 287.

source of standards for charitable hermeneutics. Michaelis writes that “the psalms are inspired; if they pray for revenge, then it cannot be wrong: We should not have a holier morality than the Bible.”<sup>84</sup> Thus the Bible determines the ethical and the mind must adjust itself to the text. Interestingly, Spinoza apparently submits to the same principle. In the *Tractatus* he says that “all of our knowledge of the Bible ... must be derived only from the Bible itself.”<sup>85</sup> However, as Halbertal aptly remarks,<sup>86</sup> he also says that the Scripture teaches us *nothing but* how to be truly pious, that is, truly moral. We observe here Spinoza’s attempt to accommodate the Protestant maxim of *sola scriptura*.<sup>87</sup> This is certainly another example – many other can be found in, e.g., the *Ethics* – of Spinoza agreeing on the linguistic shape of a given concept while reshaping its contents. In turn, Kant’s open criticism (see below) of the *sola scriptura* principle shows the extent to which the *Religion* is an anti-Protestant book.<sup>88</sup>

As to Kant’s response to Michaelis’ challenge, Kant firmly supports the position that the Psalm’s text is not self-sufficient and needs to undergo the process of “optimisation” by means of tools external to it. He proposes an alternative: either we treat the words of the Psalm in a way that will enable us to refer them to God understood correctly, or we leave them as they are but tie the matter to the inadequate notion of God. Accordingly, we either take “enemies” to stand for our evil, immoral inclinations and then our supplication will find an adequate addressee in the true God, that is, the God of universalistic morality,<sup>89</sup> or we take the whole fragment literally, but then understand it in terms of “the relation that the Jews considered themselves to have toward God as their political regent.”<sup>90</sup>

These reflections are important in recognizing that the orthodox Jews (and other temple-goers) have a wrong notion of divinity for Kant. It can be said that according to Kant Judaism in a way appropriated the God of monotheism, who is *already* singular in Judaism, but does not *yet* treat all people as equal before Him. As for Spinoza, for Kant equality before God is to be established only by Jesus of Nazareth. Presumably, this is the meaning of Kant’s otherwise out-of-context remark from *Vorarbeiten zur Religion* which states that “one should not credit the Jews with such great achievements in the field of monotheism [trans. W.K.]”<sup>91</sup>

Coming back to Kant and Spinoza, what surely distinguishes the two thinkers is that the latter pays close attention to the prophets while the former, as one commentator noted more than a hundred years ago, “together with the theologians of his time

<sup>84</sup> RGV 6:110.

<sup>85</sup> Spinoza (2007): 99.

<sup>86</sup> Halbertal (1997): 143.

<sup>87</sup> This is stressed by Edwin curly; see Spinoza (2016): 172, footnote 5.

<sup>88</sup> This is actually one of the main themes of Tomasz Kupś’s work *Filozofia religii Immanuela Kanta*, in which the author also discusses Kant’s criticism of the remaining Protestant dogmas: *sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *solus Christus* (Kupś (2008)).

<sup>89</sup> For example, we can read in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that “God who wills only obedience to commands for which absolutely no improvement of moral disposition is required cannot truly be that moral being whose concept we find necessary for a religion” (RGV 6:127).

<sup>90</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>91</sup> “... daß den Juden der Monotheism nicht so hoch anzurechnen sey” (HN 23:104).

underestimates the significance of the prophecy and overestimates the codified law, as if in it the classical form of the Israelite religion was enclosed [trans. W.K.].”<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, although Spinoza takes the issue of prophecy seriously and treats the topic at length, he acknowledges the superiority of the apostles over prophets and theorizes the supersession of the latter by the former.<sup>93</sup> He says that

before Christ’s coming the prophets were accustomed to proclaim religion *as the law of the country based upon* the covenant entered into at the time of Moses; whereas after Christ’s coming the Apostles preached religion to all people everywhere, *as the universal law* (emphasis added – W.K.).<sup>94</sup>

Thus Spinoza (like Kant)<sup>95</sup> politicizes and “temporalizes” the prophets contrasting them with the apostles through whom, as he says elsewhere, God revealed that the covenant is “no longer written in ink or on stone tablets but rather on the heart.”<sup>96</sup> Even where the prophecy is considered by Spinoza outside of the political context, it is treated by him as a promise of the Christian “change of heart.”<sup>97</sup> For example, he explains that Moses and Jeremiah “proclaimed ... that a time would come when God would inscribe his law in ... hearts [while now it is “written in ink” – see the last quotation, W.K.].”<sup>98</sup> Spinoza is therefore in accord with the Christian tradition in claiming that “Jesus was in himself the fulfilment of the law and prophets.”<sup>99</sup>

#### 4. Judaism: Kant and Mendelssohn

In his view that *Halakha* is a positive law imposed on the Jewish people by God, Kant sides with Mendelssohn, who coined a famous definition of Judaism as a “revealed law” in the *Jerusalem or on Religious Power and Judaism*. Most probably, Mendelssohn saw it as a middle ground between Spinoza’s total “deconstruction” of the Sinai revelation and the demands of the religious tradition.<sup>100</sup> In the *To the Friends of Lessing* Mendelssohn mentions Spinoza and writes that “his speculative doctrine notwithstanding,” he would have remained an orthodox Jew “if he had not ... called into question the authentic core of Judaism – its legislation.”<sup>101</sup> For now let us note that Mendelssohn agrees with

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<sup>92</sup> “[Kant] unterschätzt mit den Theologen seiner Zeit die Bedeutung des Prophetentums, und er überschätzt wie sie das kodifizierte Gesetz, als wäre in ihm die klassische Form der Religion Israels abgeschlossen” (Oettli (1906): 27).

<sup>93</sup> Hunter (2017): 60.

<sup>94</sup> Spinoza (2007): 168.

<sup>95</sup> In these rare moments when Kant mentions the prophets, he assigns to them an entirely political significance (see e.g. SF 7:80–81).

<sup>96</sup> Spinoza (2007): 230.

<sup>97</sup> See the relevant discussion in: Hunter (2017): 51–69.

<sup>98</sup> Spinoza (2007): 163.

<sup>99</sup> Hunter (2017): 59. Interestingly, as far as I can tell, Kant does not mention the prophecy as pointing toward Christ, which apparently squares with his explicit thesis (see below) about the incommensurability between Judaism and Christianity.

<sup>100</sup> Altman (1983): 22–23.

<sup>101</sup> Mendelssohn (2012): 150.

Spinoza and Kant that *Halakha* constitutes an instance of heteronomy and as such was given uniquely to the Jewish people, binding them into a community that is *legal*<sup>102</sup> and not *religious*<sup>103</sup> (if by “religious” community we understand, as Mendelssohn does, a community that is in possession of the “propositions and doctrines necessary for man’s salvation”).<sup>104</sup> This is what Mendelssohn has in mind when he cautions against confusing “supernatural legislation,” i.e. the essential element of Judaism, with the “supernatural revelation of religion.” The former – i.e. Judaism – according to Mendelssohn “commands faith in historical truths, in facts upon which the authority of our positive ritual law [i.e. *Halakha* – W.K.] is based.”<sup>105</sup> However, Mendelssohn does not interpret the law as a transient means of national prosperity, which would make it entirely contingent on historical circumstances.<sup>106</sup> He rather considers it to be a kind of a mnemonic device the purpose of which is to constantly remind the Jews – by virtue of a codified action (and not, Mendelssohn could have added, by means of mere liturgy of the Word as it happens in Christianity) – about the specific nature of their relationship with God. This relationship, in turn, could be annulled or revised only by God in the act of the second coming.<sup>107</sup> Also, Mendelssohn does not claim that God’s statute was imposed with regard to legal sanction (the rightful usage of which Mendelssohn denies to religion in general and to Judaism in particular)<sup>108</sup> and thereby by playing upon the emotions of hope and fear. On the contrary – according to Mendelssohn, this legislative act was accompanied by an appeal to “understanding” and “consideration”<sup>109</sup> and the law “itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, never ceasing to inspire contemplation.”<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, Mendelssohn continues, *Halakha* has no significance to the non-Jews, because to the *Vernunftwahrheiten* of natural religion – and only these truths are indispensable for salvation – every human being has equal access. In this way Mendelssohn preserves Judaism as a supranatural legal community but at the same time negates (against Kant and Spinoza) its purely political character. Thus Mendelssohn and Kant disagree as to what kind of heteronomy Judaism is, or, in other words, as to what kind of facts make up its essence. For Mendelssohn the facts in question are divinely legal, whereas for Kant (and Spinoza), merely political.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Altman (1983): 23–24.

<sup>103</sup> Rosenstock aptly notices that although Mendelssohn contradicts Kant on the point of Judaism being a mere polity, he agrees with him that, strictly speaking, Judaism is “not really a religion at all” (Rosenstock (2010): 191).

<sup>104</sup> Mendelssohn (1983): 90.

<sup>105</sup> Mendelssohn (2012): 156.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Altman (1983): 23; Altman (1973): 537; Feiner (2010): 173. Interestingly, at this point Mendelssohn finds support in Maimon (Maimon (2018): 64–66).

<sup>107</sup> Mendelssohn (1983): 133.

<sup>108</sup> At this point Mendelssohn contradicts Christian Wilhelm von Dohm’s famous treatise *Ueber die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (see Mendelssohn (1782): xlii).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*: 99–100.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*: 103.

<sup>111</sup> One should not miss the subtlety that by “depoliticizing” Judaism in virtue of denying it the right to coercion Mendelssohn disarms the argument suggested for example by J.G. Fichte, which states that the Jews cannot become citizens since they already are citizens and, moreover, the citizens of a “mächtiger, feindselig gesinnter Staat der mit allen übrigen im beständigem Kriege steht” (Fichte (1793): 55).

The discord between Kant and Mendelssohn also concerns the notion of God. As we have seen, in his writings concerned with religion Kant explicates the concept of God in terms of universalistic morality without leaving any room for an exclusive relationship with some particular community. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, tries to combine (synchronically) in the notion of God the political sovereign of the Jewish nation with the moral God of natural religion. For Mendelssohn, in the case of the laws valid for the Jews only, which were to secure for them “national felicity” – even though the lawgiver was indeed God himself – it was “God not in his relation as Creator and Preserver of the universe [i.e. the God of natural religion – W.K.] ... but God as a Patron and Friend ... as Liberator, Founder and Leader, as King and Head of this [i.e. Jewish] people.”<sup>112</sup>

Another crucial difference between their accounts consists in the fact that Kant takes the teachings of Christ for the next – although qualitatively different – step in the development of monotheism<sup>113</sup> and, accordingly, depicts the *Halakha* as a negative phenomenon obstructing the moral progress of humanity. Judaism, says Kant, is only an “occasion” for Christianity to arise, but still there is “no essential connection, i.e. ... no unity of concepts”<sup>114</sup> between these religions, i.e. Judaism remains a particular politico-juridical community oriented only toward earthly well-being, while the aim of Christianity is to introduce a “new principle”<sup>115</sup> of ethical universalism to which every religious *ancien regime* – and Judaism in particular – must ultimately surrender. Only this antagonism between Kant and Mendelssohn – who despite his open-mindedness was still a spokesman for *halakhic* Judaism – provides us with the proper context to understand the otherwise hardly intelligible view of the latter (after all, an *Aufklärer*), consisting in the claim that there is no such thing as moral progress of mankind.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, Mendelssohn’s opposition to the idea of mankind’s moral progress, in which he identified the hotbeds of totalitarianism, is directed against Lessing<sup>117</sup> and also against Kant as long as the latter adopts, as Altman and Rosenstock note, the former’s progressivist attitude.<sup>118</sup> Although Lessing’s works include much praise of the Jews, he nevertheless agrees with Kant that (halakhic) Judaism is a relic of the past. In *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* the author of *Nathan* claims that after Moses, a “better pedagogue”<sup>119</sup> of mankind, i.e. Christ, took his place because at the time humanity was already mature enough to embrace “the second great stage of education.”<sup>120</sup> Although, unlike Kant,<sup>121</sup> Lessing states explicitly that the current covenant (the New Testament) will also expire,<sup>122</sup> what is of

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<sup>112</sup> Mendelssohn (1983): 127.

<sup>113</sup> I mean here the shift which for Kant takes place between mere singularity of God in Judaism and the stress which Christianity puts on the moral nature of the deity.

<sup>114</sup> RGV 6:125.

<sup>115</sup> RGV 6:127.

<sup>116</sup> Mendelssohn (1983): 95–97.

<sup>117</sup> This shows the complexity of Mendelssohn’s attitude toward Lessing, whom Mendelssohn otherwise admired and tirelessly defended against Jacobi during the *Pantheismusstreit*, first in *Morgenstunden* and later in the *An die Freunde Lessings*.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Altman (1973): 542; Rosenstock (2010): 173.

<sup>119</sup> Lessing (1959): 1022.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*: 1023.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. SF 7:65.

<sup>122</sup> Lessing (1959): 1030.



interest for us here is that he – like Kant – also thinks that the old covenant (the Old Testament), that is, Judaism, in the age of Christianity, has already lost its rationale. In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn explicitly criticises Lessing’s “pedagogical optimism.” He writes:

I, for my part, cannot conceive of the education of the human race [a reference to Lessing’s *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* – W.K.] as my late friend Lessing imagined under the influence of I-don’t-know-which historian of mankind. One pictures the collective entity of the human race as an individual person and believes that Providence sent it to school here on earth, in order to raise it from childhood to manhood [i.e. to edify it morally – W.K.]. In reality, the human race is – if the metaphor is appropriate – in almost every century, child, adult, and old man at the same time, though in different places and regions of the world.<sup>123</sup>

In *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn clearly formulated the need for a separation of church and state with a view to secure equal political rights for *traditional* Judaism within the structure of the secular modern state. For Mendelssohn enlightenment did not mean the abandonment of Judaism in its historically grounded rabbinical form in order to become a German, a European, or simply a “human,” as Lessing’s Nathan arguably did. Assimilation to Germanhood or humanity accompanied by the abandonment of the “superstitious” ritual did not constitute the ultimate aim of Mendelssohn’s struggle. On the contrary, Mendelssohn claims explicitly that if a choice had to be made between the law and the civil status, the Jews should remain faithful to the law.<sup>124</sup> As Shmuel Feiner notes, for Mendelssohn “tolerance and the principles of the Enlightenment dictated that the Jews’ emancipation from civic oppression was a right, not a transaction for which payment could be collected.”<sup>125</sup> In a beautiful fragment from *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn even asks: “we cannot, in good conscience, depart from the law and what good will it do to have fellow citizens without conscience?”<sup>126</sup> Mendelssohn strictly observed Jewish law himself and he wrote in *Jerusalem* that all commandments of the *Halakha* are fundamental and cannot suffer any circumscription.<sup>127</sup> In turn, as I have already said, the Jews can be exempt from the duty of obedience to the law only by God in the second coming of the God of Israel. Mendelssohn’s main aim was then to preserve the mainstream Jewish identity of the period while adding to it – rather as a matter of aggregate than synthesis – some elements of cultural Enlightenment: its language, science and arts. In the words of Michael Meyer, Mendelssohn “was a reformer of Jewish life, but – with slight exception<sup>128</sup> – not a reformer of Judaism.”<sup>129</sup> Accordingly, Mendelssohn’s ideal state

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<sup>123</sup> Mendelssohn (1983): 95–96.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibidem*: 135.

<sup>125</sup> Feiner (2010): 163.

<sup>126</sup> Mendelssohn (1983): 135.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*: 101–102.

<sup>128</sup> This exception refers to the aforementioned Mendelssohn’s opposition to *cherem* (i.e. Jewish excommunication) as a heterodox element within Judaism which, together with his German translation of the Pentateuch, caused hostility toward him and his work among some influential rabbinic authorities (cf. Feiner (2010): 128–129; cf. also Schulte (2002): 181).

<sup>129</sup> Meyer (1995): 13. Yeshayahu Leibowitz stresses the same point in a particularly vivid way. He says that “[Mendelssohn] dachte nicht an einen jüdischen pluralismus, sondern an einen allgemein

constitutes a multiplicity under “merely” legal unity (*Einheit*), but does not degenerate into an undifferentiated uniform mass, whatever its guiding principle might be (*Einerleiheit*).<sup>130</sup> This is why it was *civil* enlightenment that for Mendelssohn was of higher value than the general “enlightenment of humanity,” which he thought presented the threat of coercive adjustment of the whole society to the Procrustean bed of the homogenising norms of the enlightened Reason. Mendelssohn addresses this threat when he writes in *On the Question: What Does ‘To Enlighten’ Mean?* that “the enlightenment of human beings can come into conflict with the enlightenment of citizens.”<sup>131</sup>

The fact that Kant did not fully understand<sup>132</sup> the fundamental message of Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* is evident from the following fragment of Kant’s 1783 letter to its author:

Herr [David] Friedländer will tell you how much I admired the penetration, subtlety, and wisdom of your Jerusalem. I regard this book as the proclamation of a great reform that is slowly impending, a reform that is in store not only for your own people but for other nations as well. You have managed to unite with your religion a degree of freedom of conscience that one would hardly have thought possible and of which no other religion can boast. You have at the same time thoroughly and clearly shown it necessary that every religion have unrestricted freedom of conscience, so that finally even the Church will have to consider how to rid itself of everything that burdens and oppresses conscience, and mankind will finally be united with regard to the essential point of religion.<sup>133</sup>

However, as we already know, Mendelssohn did not propose a “reform” of Judaism (which was done by Saul Ascher),<sup>134</sup> consisting in grounding the Jewish religion in the idea of moral reason. Even “the Church” would eventually have to renounce all that “burdens and oppresses conscience,” i.e. the religious ritual, on behalf of the “essential point of religion,” i.e. morality – it is Kant’s position, not Mendelssohn’s. Mendelssohn opted for establishing a multiconfessional *Rechtsstaat* and fought against the idea of establishing a rationalistic Leviathan in which the *Einerleiheit* would replace the *Einheit*.

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europäischen Pluralismus der gesamten zivilisierten Welt, in dem auch das Judentum, so wie es war, hätte bestehen können” (emphasis added – W.K.; Leibowitz (1994): 53).

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Schmidt (2015): 93. In a letter to Herz Homberg from 1783 Mendelssohn warns against the discourse of uniformity (prompted at the time by Joseph II’s *Judenpatent*) and says that “[the Jewish people] should obstinately oppose the Jesuitical trickery that, with every appearance of friendliness, asks for union and, at bottom, only intends to tempt us to cross over to the other side. People approach us with false steps, raise their feet up high, and yet remain in the same place. This is the unifying system of wolves who earnestly wish to be united with sheep, in order that they might gladly transform the sheep and lamb into wolf flesh” (Mendelssohn (2011b): 124).

<sup>131</sup> Mendelssohn (1997): 315. Regarding Mendelssohn’s fear of “enlightened intolerance” see also Feiner (2010): 175–178.

<sup>132</sup> Kant might have been misled by the rabbinic opposition (see footnote 128) to Mendelssohn into thinking that Mendelssohn is committed to a direct struggle against orthodox Judaism.

<sup>133</sup> Br 10:347.

<sup>134</sup> Schulte (2002): 184–198. Schulte emphasises the significance of Kant’s influence on Ascher’s revolutionary book (i.e. *Leviathan oder über Religion in Rücksicht des Judentums*).

Eventually, Kant realised that Mendelssohn's religious thought differs significantly from his own and expressed his disappointment in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. In this work Kant allies with another *maskil*, Lazarus Bendavid, to form a joint front *against* Mendelssohn (who at the time had been dead for twelve years). With an ironical reference to the acceptance of miracles by the author of *Jerusalem*, he writes:

Until (says [Mendelssohn]) God, from Mount Sinai, revokes our law as solemnly as He gave it (in thunder and lightning) – that is, until the end of time – we are bound by it ... by this stern challenge he – Kant continues – cut off their [i.e. his co-religionists' – W.K.] hope for any relief whatsoever from the burden that oppresses them.<sup>135</sup>

This quotation makes it clear that Kant considered Mendelssohn's views to be backward and anti-enlightenment, because they legitimized keeping the Jewish nation under the "oppressing burden" of ceremonial law. Moreover, *The Conflict of the Faculties* shows that Kant favoured the idea of creating a state in which the only religion would be the one "within the boundaries of mere reason." According to Kant, although religious tolerance testifies well to a government which upholds it, "in itself, such a public state of affairs in religion [i.e. when there are many religions – W.K.] is not a good thing unless the principle underlying it is of such a nature as to bring with it universal agreement on the essential maxims of belief."<sup>136</sup> Here we can see that Kant proclaims religious pluralism to be only a transitory<sup>137</sup> – and in itself undesired – stage on the way to humanity's full enlightenment, that is, the universal adoption of the religion of moral reason.<sup>138</sup> The vanguard of this movement, according to Kant, is to consist of enlightened Catholics, Protestants and even Jews: "if, – says Kant – as is now happening [this is a reference to Bendavid – W.K.], purified religious concepts awaken among them and throw off the garb of the ancient cult."<sup>139</sup> Kant continues by saying that "with the government's favour" this elite "will gradually bring the formalities of faith closer to the dignity of their end, religion itself."<sup>140</sup> The fact that the philosopher points in the *Conflict* towards including enlightened Jews like Bendavid in this striving should be treated with caution since in the same book he praises Bendavid for readiness to adopt the "religion of Jesus" with

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<sup>135</sup> SF 7:53.

<sup>136</sup> Ibidem. It should be emphasized here that for Kant there is only one religion in the strict sense of the term. For example, in *Toward Perpetual Peace* we read: "Different religions: an odd expression ... There can indeed be historically different creeds, [to be found] not in religion but in the history of means used to promote it, which is the province of scholarship, and just as many different *religious books* ... but there can be only one single religion holding for all human beings and in all times" (ZeF 8:368; see also RGV 6:104).

<sup>137</sup> Upon this kind of considerations Tomaszewska suggested that Kant's view of political secularism is closer to the "republican" model than to the "pluralist-liberal" one (Tomaszewska (2016a): 127, 144–145).

<sup>138</sup> The overrepresentation of Kant's definition of enlightenment from *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* in the relevant literature is overwhelming. Therefore, it is worthwhile to stress that later, in *Religion*, Kant identifies "true enlightenment" with the adoption of the "true" – that is, natural (moral) – religion (cf. RGV 6:179).

<sup>139</sup> SF 7:52–53.

<sup>140</sup> Ibidem.

(“preassembly”) Gospel as its vehicle.<sup>141</sup> This tells us who the *enlightened* Jew really is, according to Kant, which couples well with Kant’s aforementioned notion of the true enlightenment as the adoption of moral religion first pronounced by Jesus. Moreover, the theory of Christianity as *the* vehicle of moral religion is present in the *Religionsschrift* as well as in the *Conflict*. In the former, Kant emphasises the fact that (in its idea) Christianity is the first confession equipped with correct self-understanding, i.e. it conceives itself in its positivity only as a step in a dialectical development which is to end with the pure religion of reason.<sup>142</sup> The capacity for this dialectics, as noted earlier, is denied to Judaism whose essence for Kant is pure heteronomy without any moral potential. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, in turn, Kant claims that “euthanasia of Judaism is pure moral religion” and he means by this that as long as Christianity preserves any kind of historical faith it remains a mere “Judeo-Christianity” which for Kant falls short of Christianity understood as the “idea of religion, which must as such be based on reason.”<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, as long as positivity is indispensable, according to Kant, the particular kind of Christian positivity capable of moral dialectics is to be preferred over in all respects historical and hence “dead” Judaism.<sup>144</sup>

That Kant lacks genuine commitment to legally sanctioned religious pluralism worried the aforementioned late *maskil* Saul Ascher. Unlike Mendelssohn, Ascher adopts Kant’s ultimate goal – the pure moral religion – but he disagrees with him about the means. He accuses Kant of an arbitrary exclusion of Judaism from the possible vehicles leading to this goal. Ascher argues in *Eisenmenger der Zweite* that the exclusion is arbitrary, because Kant simply decided to interpret Judaism out of this possibility while if he had paid attention to its “spirit,” he would have found the same original morality in Judaism that he found in Christianity.<sup>145</sup> Given this Kantian picture, Ascher asks in the context of civil coexistence “in what way [the state – W.K.] should or could tolerate people [i.e. the Jews – W.K.] who stand in direct opposition to the highest purposes of mankind?” [trans. W.K.].<sup>146</sup> That Ascher’s question is a legitimate one should already

<sup>141</sup> Ibidem. Kant’s praise of Bendavid as an exemplary Jew becomes here all the more significant in the context of the latter’s acceptance of the necessity of the state-sponsored “dehalakhization” of the Jews (see a discussion in Rose (2014): 33–40).

<sup>142</sup> Kant says: “even though ... a historical faith attaches itself to pure religion as its vehicle, yet, if there is consciousness that this faith is merely such and if, as the faith of a church [i.e. Christian faith – W.K.], it carries a principle for continually coming closer to pure religious faith until finally we can dispense of that vehicle, the church in question can always be taken as the true one” (RGV 6:115). For a contrast between morally conscious “church” and the mere “temple” (i.e. synagogue) see RGV 6:105–106, 176.

<sup>143</sup> SF 7:44–45. Bettina Stangneth in her important study *Antisemitische und Antijudaistische Motive bei Immanuel Kant?* claims that Kant’s negative focus on Judaism is externally motivated and that the core of his philosophy of religion forces him to claim that also “der ‘Euthanasie’ des genuin Christlichen zugunsten der Vernunftreligion besteht” (Stangneth (2001): 41; see also ibidem: 48–50). But such a claim neglects the difference in principle between Judaism and Christianity as construed by Kant. As presented above, historical and heteronomous Judaism is for Kant the *genuine* Judaism while positive Christianity is spurious because the essence of Christianity consists in being a midwife of moral religion.

<sup>144</sup> RGV 6:111.

<sup>145</sup> Ascher (1794): 56–58.

<sup>146</sup> “... wie kann, wie darf sie [der Staat] Menschen dulden die ganz dem hohen Zwecken der Menschheit entgegenarbeiten?” (ibidem: 76).

be clear. Further indication that for Kant the state should not remain totally indifferent to Christianity's moral superiority over Judaism is provided by his claim that the state should interfere in the religious sphere as long as the usefulness of the citizens is concerned. Then he argues that the religious teaching with morality as its centre is better on "utilitarian" grounds (i.e. it produces more useful citizens) than religious teaching which does not appeal to the necessity of the moral life-conduct. Given Kant's understanding of Judaism as "morality-free," the answer to the question with which Kant ends his argument (i.e. "with which [*Glauben*] ... is the state more secure?")<sup>147</sup> should be obvious. It therefore seems that although the state and the "visible churches" (*sichtbare Kirchen*) should be separate in Kant's view, he still entertains the idea that lenient striving for comprehensive unity of the state and the spirit of Christianity expressed in purely moral "invisible church" (*unsichtbare Kirche*) remains the ultimate task of genuine politics.<sup>148</sup>

However, Kant's ambivalent attitude toward the Jews and Judaism, which constituted the subject matter of this article, did not hinder his philosophy from exerting a constructive influence on the Jewish religion. As Christoph Schulte argues, "Kant's Critiques stand at the beginning of the Reform Judaism."<sup>149</sup> But Kant prompted not only a new form of the Jewish *religion* but left a significant mark on the Jewish *philosophy* as well. As Paul Franks has recently written: "Since the end of the eighteenth century, no non-Jewish philosopher has been more central to Jewish philosophy than Kant."<sup>150</sup> This, however, is a subject matter for a separate discussion.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> SF 7:61.

<sup>148</sup> Cf. just published *Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant* by Paul Guyer (Guyer (2020): 259-321).

<sup>149</sup> "Kants Kritiken stehen sozusagen bei der Geburt des modernen Reformjudentums Pate" (Schulte (2002): 166).

<sup>150</sup> Franks (2007): 53.

<sup>151</sup> I wrote about one of its aspects in: Kozyra (2019).

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