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The changes in the Jewish world that occurred during the nineteenth century continue to reverberate today. This edited volume, arising from a 2001 conference on Samuel Holdheim at the Salomon-Ludwig-Steinheim-Institut in Duisburg, Germany, aims to open up scholarly debate on this controversial reformer. Contributors to the volume hail from Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States; the volume brings together leading scholars as well as relative newcomers to the scene of European Jewish Studies.

The anthology is divided into three parts, addressing Holdheim's intellectual development, his involvement in the ideological controversies embattling nineteenth-century German Jewry, and finally, Holdheim's intellectual and practical contributions in relation to other important figures of the Reform movement. What emerges from this volume is a fascinating portrait of a scholar and activist whose intellectual development experienced a number of important shifts, as Holdheim moved from an understanding of the rabbinic tradition as normative to a complete rejection of the authority of halakhah.

The aims of the volume are ambitious: by casting light on different facets of Holdheim's intellectual career and his performance in the various debates on the reform of Judaism in the nineteenth century, "the articles assembled in this volume provide most valuable elements for a future intellectual biography of Holdheim himself and a differentiated interpretation of the complex intellectual and social phenomenon of 'radical Reform'" (p. xxvii). Following a considerable hiatus in the reception of Holdheim's thought (publications concerning his work dried up in the early 1930s and interest was rekindled only slowly from the late 1970s onwards), the contributors to this volume argue strongly for a differentiated historical and intellectual appreciation of Holdheim.

Michael Meyer, who revived the study of Holdheim in his Response to Modernity (1988), opens the volume with an intellectual biography that reveals Holdheim's complex thought, characterized both by a "theoretical radicalism" (p. xxxi),
which led him to challenge the authority of Jewish tradition, and by a "practical conservatism" (p. xxxi), motivated by his opposition to the secularizing tendencies of the Enlightenment. Carsten Wilke’s essay on Holdheim’s career as a territorial rabbi (Landesrabbiner) illustrates this aspect of his work as well. While Holdheim’s scholarly work challenged authority and thereby placed him at the heart of the emerging radical Reform movement, his relationship to the Jewish community suggests, on the one hand, a more reluctant approach to the actual practice of reform on a liturgical and ritual level. This ambivalence was compounded, on the one hand, by the concern to avoid a split in the community and, on the other hand, by his more authoritarian demands for a state-imposed uniformity of Jewish religious observance that would level any local variations. These two opposing orientations set the tone for the volume’s articles, each of which illuminates a different aspect of Holdheim’s work.

Ken Koltun-Fromm’s analysis of the concept of religion in Holdheim’s politics of religion reveals another important trajectory of his thought. Holdheim separated strongly between the religious and the concrete, historically contingent manifestation of religious ideas. This ahistorical perspective on religion contributes significantly to Holdheim’s “theoretical radicalism” as it draws on ideas and theories, rather than an evaluation of particular historical circumstances and practices. Similarly, both Klaus Herrmann’s comparison of Holdheim with Abraham Geiger regarding the reform of the prayerbook, and Céline Trautmann-Waller’s essay, which compares Holdheim with his contemporary Leopold Zunz, demonstrate that (in contrast to scholars like Geiger and Zunz, who were historians) Holdheim’s ahistorical treatment of Judaism as a universal religion facilitated his rejection of tradition and ritual. While Herrmann shows how Holdheim’s religious universalism made him a consistent theoretician who subordinated liturgical consistency in observance to the “prophetic spirit” of Judaism’s universality, Trautmann-Waller convincingly outlines how Holdheim’s universalism led him to oppose any notion of Jewish nationalism, such as the emerging Zionist movement. By contrast, the more gradual reforming approaches of Geiger and Zunz depended upon a greater attention to historical practice and the importance of an embodied tradition, as well as a need to highlight Jewish particularity in conjunction with and not at the expense of Jewish universality.

Zunz’s accusation that the radical reformers were subordinating accurate historical inquiry for its own sake to their ideological agenda of reform may be seen to be borne out by the results of Katrien de Graef’s essay on Holdheim’s research on Karaism. While Ma’amar ha-Ishut (1861) reveals Holdheim as a historian, de Graef also shows how this work is supposed to function as a direct justification of Reform ideology. To the accusation that he embraced Karaism because he rejected the authority of the rabbinic tradition, Holdheim responded with a theory of revelation and hermeneutics that placed human agency in interpreting divine revelation in the biblical text; he argued that human interpretation of revelation had always been a part of historical context.

The essays in the second part illuminate Holdheim’s political strategy during the nineteenth-century Reform controversies. In this context, Robin Judd shows that Holdheim’s contribution to the debate on circumcision did not mean abandoning the practice (as ritual which developed historically rather than being part of an eternal divine revelation) altogether, but rather argued against it being used to bolster long-standing power structures in the Jewish community. Judd casts Holdheim’s argument as a political one that connects with his definition of the Jewish community as a religious entity and which opposes national political ambitions. In a similar vein, David Ellenson’s comparison of Holdheim’s understanding of Jewish marriage and divorce with Zacharias Frankel’s demonstrates the political character of
Holdheim's work. Holdheim's argument that Jewish marriage is a civil legal transaction without religious significance, Ellenson argues, was motivated by the notion of keeping the Jewish community focused on religion while integrating it into the civil society created by the state.

The final part of the book consists of essays comparing Holdheim to Frankel, Zunz, Sigismund Stern, Samuel Hirsch, and David Einhorn. These essays paint a portrait of Holdheim as a scholar and activist among his peers more directly than the previous sections. Andreas Brämer, Trautmann-Waller, Ralph Bisschops, Judith Frishman, and Christian Wiese develop a differentiated appraisal of Holdheim's ideological position, coupling a religious universalism with a strong desire for the confessionalization of Judaism and the elimination of any national Jewish identity. Holdheim emerges as a reformer whose radicalism appears to be rooted in his religious politics.

While Wiese in the preface rightly states that a "thorough reinterpretation of Holdheim's biography, work, and ideology from a variety of perspectives is certainly still a desideratum," this anthology makes a significant start on this project (p. xxi).

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