

BOOK REVIEW

## Vielheit. Jüdische Geschichte und die Ambivalenzen des Universalismus

By Till van Rahden. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2022. Pp. 224.  
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For researchers of German and German-Jewish history, *Vielheit* presents an opportunity to revisit some of the tensions that lay at the heart of the nineteenth century. Foremost, *Vielheit* is both a *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of ideas) that discusses diversity (*Vielheit*), difference (*Verschiedenheit*), and related concepts and their historical evolution. Van Rahden then interrogates how these concepts were integral components within German-Jewish history since the Enlightenment, especially the struggle for emancipation and integration. Moreover, *Vielheit* provides an opportunity for readers to think more carefully about universalism and particularism on a spectrum and how the Jewish minority in Germany (and perhaps elsewhere) have had to negotiate between these systems of thought in their quest for inclusion.

The book is divided into six, easily accessible chapters with subsections that are laser-focused, and which help to move forward the discussion about Jews' desire to promote difference as the basis of societal inclusion. The introduction asks us to think about numerous pairs of terms not in binary opposition to one another, but as "Sowohl-als-auch" (both ... and). This includes terms such as "universal and particular, minority and majority, communitarianism and liberalism, established and migrant, self and strange, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism" (14). To this point, readers are directed to a truism that needs more trumpeting: the modern era, especially in the democratic search for equality (*Gleichheit*), was increasingly less tolerant of difference and ambiguity. In this sense, van Rahden uses the Jewish experience to measure and evaluate a "comprehensive perspective on foundational questions of general history," as Jews wrestled with many of these terms in religious and secular discussions as the group transitioned through its success in economic and social sectors as well as Jews' political incorporation into the German state (18).

Chapter 1 traces the history of the terms "minority" and "majority," especially as their shift in meaning from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century is as wide as a chasm. The term "majority" shifted "in the border zones of empire" from one that meant the age of adulthood (age of majority) to one that brought recognition of cultural difference to the forefront during the age of imperial dissolution and national ascension (34). Still, as part of this discussion, once minorities are clearly defined as a cultural group, the question of how they fit into society shifted across the century—from a group whose individual rights were important as part of the "liberal" state to a group conception where the group (especially in the case of Jews during the interwar period) had to be protected from the democratic will of the majority. Here lies a strength of van Rahden's argument: that democracy—despite what we think it *ought* to be—was not necessarily the best governmental and societal philosophy for minorities, especially "the worry about the tyranny of the majority" that was bound together through a sovereign, populist notion of the nation, or "*Volkssouveränität*" (42). Leading into a much more empirical analysis of Jewish-Christian negotiation about German

society in the second half of the nineteenth century, van Rahden leaves us to think about how difference within a society is the best measure of a liberal democracy's health (46).

The rest of *Vielheit* focuses on episodes of German-Jewish arguments on behalf of Jews' right to difference, but also presents generally sequential comparative lenses that tackle long-standing historiographical ideas. Chapter 2 starts with a discussion about the German middle class and bourgeois society of which Jews made up an important part. Still, this middle-class society developed within a concurrent drive for unity as a nation, within which there was an ambivalence between homogeneity and individuality (51). Embedded within the rise of the German bourgeoisie and their claim to national leadership was whether or not professing Jews (and therefore, Judaism) could be included in conceptions of bourgeois morality against the superiority claims of the "Christian state." If yes, Jews could claim inclusion as citizens; such a development depended on whether Jews saw themselves as a nation or a religious community.

Chapter 3 turns to an important change within German-Jewish society: as Jews were acculturating and secularizing, there was a need to find something beyond religion—but not as a nation—with which they could identify. For several Jewish thinkers of the period, the term *Stamm* (tribe) was suitable, as it was a term already used to describe the various "tribes" of Germany that made up the new, German nation-state, which as Moritz Lazarus argued could not "overcome or abolish the opposition between national unity and the particular character of all citizens" (76). This facilitated Jews' ability to both take part in the German nation and to assert their right to difference. Terms like "Stamm" were even used to help differentiate Western European Jews from their Eastern European co-religionists, who were more of a "people" (Volk) in the ideas of Zionists.

Chapter 4 compares German Jews to Catholics through the well-worn lens of a "socio-cultural milieu." Foremost, while Catholics needed and tended to be more unified due to the perniciousness of the *Kulturkampf* launched by Bismarck—whether among their press organs, schools, social clubs, and political parties, Jews—despite rising and ever-present anti-semitism—were never unified to the same degree and stayed "an open ethnic group" (114). Despite some supra-religious organizations that tried to bridge the religious divide among German Jews, Jews also participated in and aligned with bourgeois Protestant organizations. Sure, the German-Jewish press thrived, but it was—like Jewish clubs and schools—something that Jews took part in alongside their participation in similar non-Jewish institutions. Moreover, a *Zentrum* (the Catholic political party) could never be found among Jews because the Jewish population was a fraction of the Catholic populace and their views ran the gamut politically, so Jews tended to align more with liberal political parties which better defended their right to difference.

The final chapter brings us back to historiographical debates—this time, among how Jewish thinkers have seen the conception of "assimilation." The chapter looks at assimilation through three historiographical conceptions: as treason, as destiny, and as chance. The first is typically associated with Zionists, who lament what happened to Jews during the Holocaust and see assimilation as illusory. The second formulation tends to look at the inevitability of assimilation, as Jews sought in the modern nation-state era to blend into their surroundings and break away from the medieval, incorporated community. The last formulation sees assimilation as an opportunity for negotiation and creativity, which the many responses within Judaism to modernity show us. All three of these concepts draw our attention to "the changing understanding between the universal and the particular" and how assimilation—which has seen its use increase again—is a negotiated term (144).

*Vielheit* is an important read for German scholars of the long nineteenth century. I hope an English translation follows soon, as many other fields would benefit by engaging with this book. Overall, using German Jewry is well-suited for a general discussion about diversity and difference, as the issue of Jewish integration (infamously posed as "the Jewish question" by Bruno Bauer) persisted alongside other dramatic changes in German society. Whether it was the fallout from the Revolutionary period, the creation of the "Christian state" and the mid-

century revolutions, the exponential growth of heavy industry, the creation and expansion of the German Empire, the rise of liberalism and socialism, or the implementation and ramifications of the *Kulturkampf*, Jews—as participants or objects—were never far from the center of discussion whether they wanted to be or not. Moreover, German Jews are a great test case for a society's toleration of difference, especially as Jews straddle many of the ambivalences of modern society. As van Rahden argues, studying the Jewish minority and its relationship to society demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of a commitment to liberal democratic ideals, within which particularism and universalism are more balanced. Indeed, thinking about Jews as an ambivalence (perhaps even a moderating force) within society is yet another lens through which the other excesses of the long nineteenth century can be viewed and why Jews were (are) targets for progressives and conservatives alike.