

“A Barbaric, bloody act”. The anti-circumcision polemics of the Enlightenment and its internalization by nineteenth-century German Jews

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English abstract: “Nothing will come of it; As long as the Jews remain Jews and will be circumcised, they will never become more useful than harmful in civil society,” Kant said. The German Enlightenment demanded the Jews to abandon their religious identity expressions, most notably the circumcision. As a result of non-Jewish discussions about rituals, the core role of circumcision was challenged for the first time in Jewish history by supporters of the Jewish Enlightenment movement. Jewish laymen condemned the “scary, unenlightened” traditional rabbis. Their anti-circumcision campaign also found support among some Reform rabbis. Indeed, many Jews gave up the circumcision—but the existing resentment towards them did not disappear. The following article provides a case study in the genealogy of “secular” attitudes towards the body. The paper traces this genealogy from Early Christian positions on circumcision through historic Protestantism towards discussions about the Jewish ritual in the Age of Enlightenment. The article wishes to highlight the continued relevance of the matter and show how both having a “German body” and being part of the “German nation” were seen as incompatible with being circumcised—and are up to debate until the present day.

Introduction

German theologian Johann Friedrich Abegg ([1798] 1976:190) recorded Immanuel Kant saying that “as long as the Jews remain Jews and will be circumcised,” they cannot become useful members of society. Abegg’s note is not the only proof of Kant’s polemics against Jewish ritual observance. Kant asserted ([1798] 1979:95) that the only way Jews could be integrated into German society is if they adopt the “religion of Jesus” and interpret the Bible in an Enlightened spirit. He termed this process “the euthanasia of Judaism” which is “pure moral religion, freed from all the ancient statutory teachings.” The acceptance of Jews into the German collective be-

came a question of discarding religious observances (Bleich 2007:7, Mack 2003:35).

Along with other expressions of Jewish religious identity, such as the dietary laws or the ritual slaughter, the ritual circumcision was diminished for its particularistic aspect. In the eyes of the philosophers of the German Enlightenment only those religious laws were legitimate which affect morality and can be applied to every single person. Christianity was set as an example. As Kant ([1793] 1996:187) put it: “Christianity possesses the great advantage over Judaism of being represented (...) not as a statutory but as a moral religion, and as thus entering into the closest relation with reason so that, through reason, it was able of itself, without historical learning, to be spread at all times and among all peoples with the greatest trustworthiness.” Judaism was seen as a primitive cult that was overcome by Christianity’s universalistic approach (Batnitzky 2011:45, Hess 2002:115). Accordingly, in the body politics of the German Enlightenment, circumcision became a sign of self-separation and thus a hurdle for Jews to have “secular,” “German” bodies (Efron 2001:222).¹

Many Jewish intellectuals who studied the writings of these philosophers and were affiliated with the Jewish Enlightenment movement, also known as *Haskalah*, questioned the role and the circumstances of the circumcision. This was in the history of Jewry unprecedented since circumcision has been always considered crucial. A minority of radical voices advocated for the complete abandonment of the ritual. Other, more moderate groups argued for modifications to the ritual. And other representatives downplayed the ritual’s religious meanings. A good many Jews engaged with and/or adapted to the German Enlightenment’s seemingly secular body politics (Hödl 2003:189, 193).

However, Kant and other representatives of the Enlightenment were not religiously neutral. I will argue in this paper that their polemics against the circumcision was part of a longer development which goes back centuries. Most of them came from stringent Protestant, such as Calvinist and Pietist, households and, as I will show, reproduced Christian and Protestant polemics against the circumcision. I believe that without knowing, Jewish reformers internalized and reproduced this anti-Jewish resentment that originated in the beginnings of Christianity. To illustrate this process, I will present nineteenth-century German Jewish publications on circumcision. I will trace their main arguments regarding this Mosaic commandment and contrast them with those of the non-Jewish philosophers. Moreover, to support my thesis of Christian and Protestant

1 I will problematize the concept of a “secular” and “German” body in the second chapter.

influence on the nineteenth-century Jewish polemics against circumcision, I will also present some Christian historical approaches towards body politics and how the German Enlightenment absorbed these. But first, I want to introduce the traditional Jewish approach to circumcision.

The Jewish circumcision and the Christian critique

The Hebrew term “brit milah” which stands for ritual circumcision, already tells much of its purpose: “brit” stands for a covenant, “milah” for circumcision. The brit milah is viewed in Judaism as the entry of a male descendant into the covenant with God. According to Jewish tradition, this bond started with Abraham; it is also called the “Abrahamic covenant” (Klein 1979:421). As the Hebrew Bible says (Genesis 17:9–12 Jewish Publication Society 1985 Version):

“⁹ God further said to Abraham, ‘As for you, you and your offspring to come throughout the ages shall keep My covenant. ¹⁰ Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days.”

The Egypt-based rabbi Maimonides ([1190] 1963:610) wrote that it is “well known what degree of mutual love and mutual help exists between people who all bear the same sign, which forms for them a sort of covenant and alliance.” Jews cultivate this use until today. Sander Gilman (2014a:58) emphasized how circumcision became a “central communitarian act defining the bounds of a group.” According to Isaac Klein (1979:421) and Judith Bleich (2007:23), this is the only rite that is observed by virtually all Jewish denominations and sects, it has thus become a strong force contributing to Jewish survival.

Since antiquity most Jews have lived as a minority within Christian or Muslim majority cultures. Jews in Muslim majority societies have never faced challenges by observing the commandment of circumcision, since circumcision has been widespread in these territories, even before the appearance of Islam (Gilman 2014a:58, Hollender 2012:234). The Quran has no clues on circumcision, but according to other Islamic traditions, it is a sign of men’s purity to be circumcised (see e.g. Sahih Muslim, Kitab Al-Taharah 16:49 Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah 2005). Circumcision of the sons is common in Muslim majorities until today. In this respect, life for Jews living in Christian majority societies was completely different (Hollender 2012:234).

In the early days of Christianity, circumcision played an important role (Thiessen 2011:114). Jesus himself was circumcised on his eighth day according to the Gospels (Luke 2:21 New Revised Standard Version 1989): “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” In the liturgical year the feast of the circumcision of Jesus is celebrated to this day, in many cases with depictions of the brit milah. The Gospel of Luke portrays also the family of John the Baptist, whose parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (1:6). According to Luke (1:59), John was circumcised too on the eighth day. The first Christians acted within the realms of Judaism (Knox 2010:219).

After the death of Jesus around 33 CE, several missionary journeys were initiated, and many Gentiles were converted to “Christo-Judaism.” But with the growing number of Gentile Christians, the community was in crisis. As Matthew Thiessen (2011:67) pointed out, the Torah contains laws mostly concerning people of Jewish descent and it does not really address the status of converts since Judaism is not a religion that would be traditionally engaged in proselytizing. Should Gentile converts observe the dietary laws? Should they keep the Shabbat the way Jews do? Are they expected to undergo circumcision? Many of the new converts of non-Jewish origin did not want to observe the Mosaic commandments. Especially circumcision was found abhorrent by the Hellenized Gentile converts living in the Eastern Mediterranean (Glick 2005:30).

As Matthew Thiessen (2011:9) stated, circumcision is mentioned only three occasions in the canonical gospels. But even if circumcision is neglected by the Gospels, the apostle Paul wrote extensively on the matter. Paul, whose missionary journeys lead him to Hellenized communities in the Southern Balkan and Western Anatolia peninsulas, wanted to be more successful in his missionary activities (Hurtado 2003:209). Thus, he argued that it is not the brit milah that is important, but the “circumcision of the heart” (Romans 2:29). He explained this new perspective in his letters to the Romans, Philippians, and Corinthians and also in the deuterio-Pauline epistles—letters whose authenticity is disputed—to the Colossians, Ephesians and Titus (Thiessen 2011:10). In his letter to the Romans (2:25–29), Paul wrote:

“²⁵ Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For a person is not a Jew who

is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical.
²⁹ Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.”

Other Jewish Christians back in the Land of Israel were critical of the Paulinian approach. To put an end to this controversy around the question of whether Gentile converts to Christianity are obliged to keep the Jewish laws, the Council of Jerusalem, whose accounts were recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*, came together around 50 CE. During this meeting, Paul spoke up on behalf of the Hellenized Gentiles and demanded that these obligations should be lifted (Knox 2010:219–235). Under the influence of Paul, the council decided that Gentile converts to Christianity were not required anymore to observe Jewish law (Knox 2010:220).

Paul, of course, did not invent a new religion, his interpretation was following the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth who already described rituals as secondary to belief. In Matthew 22:37–40, for example, Jesus is quoted to have said that the love for God and fellow human beings is the core of his teachings. However, Jesus himself is not quoted in the Gospels on circumcision. One citation on this issue is attributed to him by the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* (53 New Testament Apocrypha 1991): “His [Jesus’] disciples said to him: ‘Is circumcision useful or not’ He said to them: ‘If it was useful, their father would beget them from their mother already circumcised. But the true circumcision in Spirit has proved useful in every way.’” Nonetheless, according to Thiessen (2011:9), it is unlikely that this saying truly goes back to Jesus: This text was written after the Council of Jerusalem and is probably the work of someone who was siding with Paul in opposing the brit milah.

With the Paulinian reform regarding circumcision, the celebration of Jesus’ circumcision was assigned a new meaning. The “victim of the foreskin” became equated with the “sacrifice on the cross.” Christians are expected, instead of physical circumcision, to believe in the sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection (Rutishauser 2016:245). By keeping circumcision, the proselytizing of the non-Jewish world would hardly have been successful. The abandonment of circumcision and the Mosaic law lead eventually to a final partition of Judaism and Christianity: Christianity ceased to be a Jewish sect and became a world religion. This split also resulted in the anti-circumcision/anti-Jewish attitude of the early Christian church.

As early as in the second half of the first century, just a few years after the Council of Jerusalem, the *Epistle of Barnabas* affirmed that Jews are no longer in covenant with God for not abolishing circumcision in favor of the “new law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is free from the yoke of

compulsion, might have its offering, one not made by man.” The author of the letter accuses Jews of not circumcising their hearts and ears, i.e. are not capable of understanding Jesus’ message (Rhodes 2004:40). Christian theologians reassured this position. The late second-century *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* (Chapter 4) explained that the Jews’ “scrupulosity concerning food, and their superstition as respects the Sabbaths, and their boasting about circumcision, and their fancies about fasting and the new moons (...) are utterly ridiculous.” Thomas Aquinas wrote in his commentary on Luke 1:59 that “[t]hrough Christ circumcision ceased.” According to Aquinas, salvation is by faith alone possible, also known as *sola fide*. This doctrine asserts God’s pardon for all mankind is granted through faith alone, excluding all profound “work,” including rituals such as circumcision (Torrell 2005:184).

The doctrine of *sola fide* was later emphasized by historic Protestantism. Due to the activities of the reformers, religion became an internal matter, focusing solely on the issue of belief, a question of personal conscience. At the same time, its external forms, such as circumcision, were considered not necessary anymore or were stigmatized as barbaric, primitive or fundamentalist (Asad et al 2013:x). Luther—who was arguably the most important mediator between Pauline and Enlightenment sentiments—opposed first anti-Jewish sentiments, but when he realized that his efforts to convert Jews to Protestantism were in vain, he turned against them. In his 1543 treatise *On the Jews and their lies*, the German Reformation leader ([1543] 1841:119) used circumcision throughout his work as a symbol of Jewish inferiority:

“The Jews’ arrogance and boast of circumcision over against the uncircumcised Gentiles are a loud void, and it deserves nothing but God’s wrath unless accompanied by something else. They have, as God says, an uncircumcised heart. But the Jews do not pay attention to the foreskin of the heart; rather they think that God should behold their arrogant circumcision in the flesh and hear their arrogant boasts over against all Gentiles, who are unable to boast of such circumcision. They do not see, these blind, miserable people, that God condemns their uncircumcised heart so clearly and explicitly (...), and thereby condemns their physical circumcision together with their boasting and their prayer. They go their own way like fools, making the foreskins of their heart always longer and always thicker with such arrogant boasts before God and their abhorrence of all other peoples. They want to be God’s only people by the virtue of such void, arrogant circumcision in the flesh, until the foreskin of their heart has become thicker than an iron mountain and they can no longer hear, see, or feel, not even their own Scripture which they read daily with blind eyes overgrown with a pelt thicker than the bark of an oak tree.”

In his work, Luther ([1543] 1842:116) depicted Jews as bloodthirsty primitives and claimed that “the Jews force the skin back on the little penis and tear it open with sharp fingernails (...), this way they cause extraordinary pain to the child.” Luther’s vile language reflected the norms of the Middle Ages when the depiction of Jews as having a degenerate body was pretty common. As Klaus Hödl (2000:57) explained, for a long time there was an associative connection between the Jew and the devil who was depicted as limping, thus diseased. As a result of this association, Jews were prescribed with devil-like physical characteristics, such as the hooked nose or cloven/flat feet (see also Gilman 1991:39). This mental connection might also explain the brutal images Luther used.

This aversion towards the Jews’ circumcision was maintained by the German Enlightened philosophers. Even if the philosophers refused to use Luther’s demonizing language and the Medieval “satanization” of the Jewish body, they established this anti-circumcision policy as part of the “secular,” “German” body politics.

The German Enlightenment and the politics of circumcision

Kant was by far not the only thinker of the German Enlightenment who believed that “Judaism is not a religion at all, but simply the union of a number of individuals who, since they belonged to a particular stock, established themselves into a community under purely political laws” (Kant [1793] 1996:154). Kant desired a religion that is rational, i.e. not based on “work” and profound obligations, such as circumcision and other practices. For this reason, Kant targeted the Jews as the embodiment of a barbaric cult in opposition to the Protestant Christians who acted in the name of reason only (Mack 2003:31).

Kant’s thinking was emblematic of the era of the Enlightenment. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1845:560) argued that “the Jews have been sinners because it is not true that the circumcision and the observance of the ritual laws would redeem one: the whole world was a sinner before Christ. Only since the appearance of the Gospels can the sin be defeated, and only through the Christian faith.” Friedrich Schleiermacher considered the Jewish law to be an obstacle in the inclusion of Jews and demanded Jews to exclude any notion of public practice and to put the focus on the interior aspects of religion (Batnitzky 2011:26). For Schleiermacher ([1799] 1868:35) a valid religion “maintains its own sphere and its own character only by completely removing itself from the sphere and character of speculation as well as from that of praxis.” Other philosophers

such as Johann Gottfried Herder embraced similar ideas. Circumcision was not perceived as an act in accordance with the Enlightened precepts of the age. The solution to the Jewish question became the abandonment expressions of religious identity, assimilation and, ideally, the conversion to Christianity (Langer 2019:123).

These philosophers reproduced the Christian polemic against Judaism as a primitive cult which I presented earlier in this paper. In the German Enlightenment, Protestantism became the cornerstone of a rational body politic. As Michael Mack (2003:29) stated, for the Königsberg philosopher the body politic seems to reenact in a seemingly secular manner the Protestant concept of salvation, i.e. which proclaims salvation through renunciation of material and exterior factors and demands nothing else but faith. Mack is not the only one raising awareness of the Protestant influences in Kant's works. Friedrich Paulsen (1900), Anna Szyrwińska (2017), and Kazuya Yamashita (2000) also showed that Kant's moral images reproduce Protestant norms. As Sander Gilman (1991:38) expressed, the Christian body – the Jewish body's counter-image – became secularized into the "German" body with the rise of the modern body politics.

However, a "secular body" means more than just disbelief in supernatural beings. As Talal Asad (2011: 661–662) highlighted, secular body politics look "to minimizing distress in a plural society." They suggest that "the distinction between private conviction (private in the sense of being a claim to immunity from interference by others) and political behavior" protect against unreason. In the process of nation-building "secular" body politics emerged, in which – to quote Schirin Amir Moazami (2016:161) – "the construction of the nation as a biological entity served as an entrance point to rationalize both the collective, that is, national and the individual body." The process of turning Jewish religious practices into a matter of political and medical discourse throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became "part of a broader construction of a biologically defined national unity" (Amir Moazami 2016:161).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the unified German nation's oneness was also symbolized with the metaphor of the *Volkskörper*, the German people's body (Amir-Moazami 2016:161). Under the influence of social Darwinism this one-body-metaphor was especially popular among antisemitic authors and journalists who used it to construct an essential difference between Jews and Germans – and to urge the elimination of the Jews' sick body. For example, German Emperor Wilhelm I's court chaplain, Protestant pastor Adolf Stoecker (1885:355) said that the German *Volkskörper* is infused Christian notions which implicitly means that Jews have no place in it. In his 1880 speech *On the undoubtedly justified and noble necessity of a contemporary anti-Jewish movement*, Stoecker (1885:186) pro-

claimed this idea more explicitly by claiming that “modern Judaism is a foreign blood-stain in our *Volkskörper*, it is an indeed perishable force.” As Robin Judd (2007:105) observed, “[d]uring a moment when increasing numbers of people drew parallels between the body of the nation state and a human corpus, the relationship of Jewish ritual behavior with diseases took on greater meaning.”

Hardly any other Jewish ritual received so much criticism in nineteenth-century German society as circumcision which was seen as a sign of disintegration (Efron 2001:222, Hödl 2003:193). In 1831, Heinrich Paulus, Lutheran theologian and professor of oriental languages at the University of Heidelberg accused the Jews of insisting on circumcision to separate themselves from the Christians. Paulus (1831:14), who heavily opposed the Jewish emancipation in Baden, noted that in the case of Abraham, “circumcision was a nomadic sign of belonging to God. (...) But nowadays, it is a sign of national self-separation, and that is why they can become proteges at the most, but never citizens.” According to Paulus (1831:14), if the Jews want citizenship, they have to adapt to the norms of the Christian German nation. To justify his expectations, Paulus (1831:86) argued, that if the Jews had their own state in the Holy Land, they would not grant citizenship to the “Moabites, Ammonites, etc. or the current inhabitants of the land unless they are circumcised.” Paulus (1831:58,78) offered the Jews alternative theological-Protestant-readings of the Hebrew Bible to convince them of the uselessness of circumcision (Efron 2001:223).

Other German intellectuals also demanded that the Jews give up circumcision and assimilate. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt ([1809] 1903:97), Judaism maintained “a system which forced an external mark of distinction upon the male sex (by reason which the religious organization may be characterized as political), that separated them even from those among they live.” Furthermore, Humboldt ([1809] 1903:98) believed that Judaism’s national character “mainly manifests itself in the Jew’s stubborn attachment to primitive custom and a remarkable power of passive resistance.” This expression of Jewish religious identity was condemned also by German ethnographer Richard Andree (1881:153) who claimed that “circumcision was the pride and the symbol of the covenant of the Hebrews, and a symbol of their separateness from other, non-circumcised peoples, and that upon which their nationality was conditioned. The uncircumcised did not belong to the Jews. The Jews despised everyone who was uncircumcised.”

The philosophical debates received support also from the medics. In the nineteenth century, governmental authorities began to monitor various aspects of public health and circumcision became increasingly a matter of public interest (Bleich 2007:8). Robin Judd (2007) traced how the medi-

calization of male circumcision gained weight in Germany when this Jewish practice became a matter of political debates. Judd showed how the increasing condemnation of male circumcision as an unnecessary surgical procedure and a bloody, barbaric act functioned as a platform to condemn Judaism for lacking the “Enlightened” spirit. German doctors demonized the circumcision also by claiming that the majority of patients they treated with gonorrhoea were Jewish, others articulated that it was an unnecessary act “deforming” a perfect organ (Efron 2001:228–231). The analysis of the Jewish body was linked to establishing the difference, and thus dangerousness, of the Jew: The image of the Jewish body shifted from the religious anti-Judaism to the rhetoric of the pseudo-science of antisemitism. (Gilman 1991:38–39). As Schirin Amir-Moazami (2016:152–153) pointed out, these actions not only fueled antisemitism but also fostered modern medicine as the opposite of the Jews’ “uncivilized” ritual practices. And this was also true from the other way around, as Judith Bleich (2007:7) wrote: “To be sure, opposition to the ritual of circumcision was often rooted in anti-Semitic bias and prejudice. However, that opposition was also an outgrowth of newly developing attitudes toward the body, together with scientific and medical advances, as well as anthropological studies of myths and rituals of primitive societies.”

But outsiders’ interference with Jewish law did not stay in the realm of theological, philosophical and medical discussions. From the Reichstag debates and city hall meetings to discussions in the local and national press, non-Jews and Jews alike looked to Jewish rites, most notably the circumcision, when they debated the limits of religious tolerance in the country. These debates over circumcision had also a significant effect on the German state and its policies (Judd 2007:8). Various German state governments passed laws in an attempt to control the procedure of *brit milah*, seeking to sanitize in surgical terms and make it conform as much as possible to German sensibilities. Since 1819, Prussia had promoted the practice of having a physician attend all circumcision ceremonies. Already five years later it was decreed that the *mohel* (circumciser) had to pass an examination to prove his medical proficiency. The same measures were introduced in the Rhineland. Noncompliance resulted in a monetary fine of between 5 and 20 talers for the boy’s father, and from 10 to 50 talers for the *mohel* (Efron 2001:224).

The Jewish Enlightenment and the question of circumcision

By the middle of the nineteenth century, most of the Jewish congregations in Germany belonged to the Reform movement. Traditionalist synagogues

were a minority. Since the Reform movement rose from supporters of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, it regarded Judaism as a continually developing religion. On the contrary to the Traditionalists, Reform Jews stood for a historical-critical approach of the religious tradition, of the role of the Bible and the Talmud, of religious observances (Fölling 1995:69). Even though the critique on circumcision was in the centuries beforehand only a topic of non-Jewish polemics, some adherents of the Reform movement—laymen, scholars and even rabbis—joined this campaign and demanded the abandonment or the revision of the brit milah. They engaged not only with the claims of the Enlightened philosophers but also to those of the anti-circumcision physicians (Hödl 2003:193–196). With their emergence, the core role of circumcision has been challenged for the first time in Jewish history. As Judith Bleich (2007:7) formulated, “deprecatory attitudes (...) were internalized by acculturated Jewish intellectuals in their desperate quest for acceptance in a society that had always rejected them as alien.” In this chapter, following Bleich’s observation of internalized “deprecatory attitudes” by acculturated Jewish intellectuals, I will present some significant Jewish intellectual critiques on circumcision. While it is hard to trace empirically whether their critique on the circumcision was a matter of internalized polemics or not, I believe that the reader will see how these positions and discussions were influenced by or adapted talking points made by antisemitic, Protestant and secularist thinkers this paper presented in the first two chapters.

One of the loudest Jewish opponents of this commandment was the Hanover physician Philipp Wolfers (1831:48) who wrote in *The circumcision of the Jews* that “the rationalist will try to prove the natural origin of the circumcision, and he will be able to show that it belongs to other times, to other peoples, to another climate and therefore will dismiss the circumcision for our times, for our people and our climate.” In addition to Wolfers, many other Jewish doctors spoke up, who were either categorically against circumcision or who criticized the circumstances under which the ceremony was conducted, such as the Dessau physician Adolf Arnhold. The Dresden practitioner Elias Collin also demanded that the state administration should take more responsibility and reside over the Jewish ritual laws because the rabbis, the traditional leaders of the communities, were “frighteningly ignorant” and “lack any anatomical, therapeutic knowledge” (Judd 2007:44). Wolfers, Arnhold, and Collin were not the only laymen who spoke openly against the circumcision of infants or the circumstances in which these ceremonies took place. They were soon followed by the so-called Frankfurt controversy that engulfed the entire Jewish community in the German states.

The Frankfurt Controversy

In 1843, a Frankfurt-based banker named E. Flörsheim declined to circumcise his son, but at the same time requested his child to be registered as a Jew in the communal records (Bleich 2007:3). According to the records of Samuel Holdheim (1857:61), Flörsheim was affiliated with a newly established group: the Frankfurt Society of the Friends of Reform. The Society was founded in 1842 by a group of forty-five Jewish laymen who felt that rabbinic interpretations are not compatible with the modern Jewish environment, that the higher culture of civilization (i.e. the German Enlightenment) freed them from the religious practices. They issued a manifest of three sentences:

“We acknowledge in the Mosaic religion the option of unlimited freedom. The collection of controversies, explanations, and obligations, usually known as Talmud, has no dogmatic or practical authority for us. We do not wait or wish for a messiah who would lead back the Israelites to the Land of Palestine; we know only one home country [Vaterland], to which we belong through birth and citizenship” (cited in Fränkel 1844:1).

Members of the Society believed that Judaism is a continually developing religion. The group also declared that the ritual circumcision of infants was neither a religious duty nor a symbolic act. Especially regarding the admission of converts, they considered circumcision to be obsolete (Gilman 2014a:62, Philipson 1905:320,322).

Amid the controversy, Berlin-based physician and Reform Jew Joseph Bergson sided with the Leipzig weekly magazine *The Orient* [Der Orient] to express his views. Jérôme Segal (2016:216) cited Bergson saying that one should differentiate between “physical and spiritual circumcision” and that “through giving up circumcision one does not leave behind the covenant.” Bergson is also quoted by Segal claiming that “the circumcision does not make the Israelite an Israelite.” Segal presented in his paper only these two arguments by Bergson and painted thus a picture of the Berlin physician as if he would have opposed the circumcision. However, if we read Bergson’s entire article (1843:283–284), we get a different impression. In the article, he called the brit milah an important ceremony and refused to accept comparisons with the Christian baptism. Bergson did not call for its abolition, but for medical analysis and improved hygiene. He elaborated his position in the book *On the circumcision from a historical, critical and medical point of view*. Here, Bergson (1844:142–143) explained that the foreskin has no physiological function and thus it is not necessary for the Jews to give up on this ceremony. Still, he urged

for modernized medical circumstances controlled by the state under which the circumcisions should take place (see also Judd 2007:43).

As a reaction to this controversy, which turned into one of the biggest ones within the German-speaking Jewish world, Frankfurt municipal rabbi Salomon Abraham Trier launched a pro-circumcision campaign. Trier (1844) published a book in Frankfurt with 28 reports by Orthodox, Reform and unaffiliated rabbis from mostly German-speaking communities who all expressed their opinions on the necessity of circumcision. However, some of these statements lead to further disputations. Two Reform Jewish leaders, Samuel Hirsch, chief rabbi of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and Isaac Noah Mannheimer, preacher and rabbi from Vienna took a new turn in the debate. According to the two religious scholars, circumcision is part of the essence of Judaism. Hirsch (1844:48–57) presented in his position paper a hierarchy of commandments. In his opinion, dietary laws and Shabbat laws are negligible—which were anyway neglected by many Reform Jews—unlike the brit milah. Mannheimer (1844:89–104) similarly stated that circumcision is the highest duty, being even more important than the observance of Shabbat. He refused to register uncircumcised boys, to officiate at their bar mitzvah, marriage or burial ceremonies (Glick 2005:122, Lenhard 2014:219).

Hirsch’s and Mannheimer’s statements were met with criticism by various sides. Many rabbis, who viewed the activities of the Frankfurt Society critically, were also irritated by Hirsch and Mannheimer. According to Rabbi Simon Bloch, the reviewers should have known that circumcision is not a requirement to recognize someone as a Jew, nor can its absence make someone who is Jewish by birth a non-Jew. Circumcision is merely a sign that the individual will keep the halachic rules. If the parents comply with the rules, the offspring will probably act accordingly, since he is expected to grow up in an observant household (Lenhard 2014:220).

Rabbi Abraham Geiger, one of the chief ideologues of Reform Judaism, got also involved in the debate when he wrote in a letter to the historian Leopold Zunz, who also published a statement connected to the project of Salomon Trier, that circumcision is “a barbaric, bloody act,” which can remind us of Luther’s polemics against the ritual:

“I am unable to support circumcision with any conviction, just because it has always been so highly regarded. It remains a barbaric, bloody act, which fills the father with anxiety and subjects the other to morbid stress. The idea of sacrifice, which once consecrated the procedure, has certainly vanished among us, as it should. It is a brutal practice that should not continue. No matter how much religious sentiment may have clung to it in the past,

today it is perpetuated only by custom and fear, to which surely we do not want to erect temples.” (Geiger 1878:181, translation from Glick 2005:122)

Geiger even wished for a new blessing ceremony similar to those for girls that would replace circumcision (Glick 2005:304). Nevertheless, Geiger never issued a public statement against circumcision. Although he considered its future abolition possible and desirable, he believed that rituals should be maintained as long as they contributed to the revival of the Jews’ religious-moral feeling.

All the more outspoken in this regard was the well-known “radical” reform rabbi, Samuel Holdheim. The Berlin rabbi made a name for himself earlier with his new proposals: He officiated at intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews and stood for Prussian patriotism. For Holdheim, the circumcision was a sign of the self-separation of Jews from the majority population, completely in accordance with the German Enlightened philosophers (Glick 2005:304). Holdheim (1844:7) based his thesis on rabbinical law, according to which a Jew is a Jew based on origin or conversion – regardless the fact if he is circumcised or not. Besides, Holdheim (1844:8) argued that if women do not have to be circumcised to be accepted as Jews, why would men need that. In his critique (1844:53) he targeted also Mannheimer by name. Today’s Jews, said Holdheim, whose faith in God is firm, do not need physical signs to express their devotion. His reasoning was based solely on the antiquatedness of this habit, as he (1844:72) wrote: “Jewish legalism has been in a sleep of the dead for long.” For Holdheim, circumcision had no greater importance than the sacrifice of the Passover lamb that had been given up centuries ago. If Jews managed to leave the animal sacrifices behind, even though they were commanded by the Torah, they can also leave behind other Mosaic commandments, including the brit milah (Denniston et al. 2001:42, Glick 2005:122). For Holdheim (1844:76), it was no longer the *Shulchan Aruch*, the sixteenth-century compendium of Jewish law which prescribed the law, but “the legislation of the state.” Accordingly, circumcision should be interpreted in a symbolic way (Efron 2001:224). In the Holdheimian interpretation (1844:7), adherence to circumcision is not compulsory, nor is compliance with other rabbinical laws (Judd 2007:43).

To put an end to the discussion, eighty reform rabbis of the German-speaking world gathered in Leipzig in 1869. This conference went without a result. In the next year there was no decision in this respect, the proposed synod for the year 1870 had to be postponed because of the Franco-German war. Only two years later, in 1871 in Augsburg, the official position of the Rabbinical Conference was announced. Here circumcision was called “an important act for Judaism,” but the synod also declared the

uncircumcised boys to be Jews (Dubnow 1920:340). The debate was more or less over for Jews in Germany—but it continued among the German Jewish immigrants in the USA.

The debate continues

The number of Jews who decided against circumcision is not easy to track. Ellen Ginzburg Migliorino was able to investigate the number of circumcisions in the region of Trieste, Austria-Hungary. According to these findings, in 1901 83 percent of babies were circumcised. Ten years later this was only 60 percent (cited in Segal 2014:219). According to Segal (2014:219), this should have been similar in other municipalities in Central Europe. Still, the majority of Jews stuck to this old commandment—but they reformed it in a way that it became compatible with the standards of the modern age. A German Jewish physician named Bamberger observed in 1912 how “un-Jewish” circumcision ceremonies in the past decades came. He claimed that circumcision got a new meaning as a medical operation, God and the Abrahamic covenant got exiled. As much as it could be, the ceremony got “de-orientalized,” indeed Germanized, applying German notions of cleanliness (Efron 2001:231). Still, retrospectively, we know that all these compromises that Jews made to be accepted by the majority, did not work. Despite radical assimilation among Jews, they were still perceived by the majority population as the “others.” Although the debate about circumcision triggered intellectual discourse within the Jewish communities and many acculturated Jews decided not to circumcise their sons, it did not solve the existing resentment against Jews.

Resentments against circumcision have not disappeared even after the Holocaust. In 2012, the German parliament was discussing a law prohibiting religious circumcision of sons which would have made Germany the first country in the world banning ritual circumcision. The debate surrounding this legal case constructed a dualism of Germanness and religious observance (Canan and Foroutan 2017:166). The initiative was overturned, but in the heat of the public debate, the traditional anti-circumcision resentments arose. But there were also new rationales: Schirin Amir-Moazami (2016:153) noted, for example, how the anti-circumcision campaign adapted slogans of initiatives against sexual violence. Even though this debate was not anymore triggered by the Jewish practice of circumcision, but by the Islamic one (Gilman 2014b:125), the debate stigmatized Jews and Muslims alike (Yurdakul 2018:209–211). Yurdakul (2018:222) suggested that this common experience of exclusion could facilitate an alliance of Jews and Muslims for religious plurality and social participation in Germany.

By writing this paper, my aim was not to endorse circumcision but to show how a religious minority's – in our case: the Jewish and Muslim – ritual practices can be used as a justification for the group's exclusion from society and how the narrative of exclusion can be reproduced by members of the minority itself. While antisemitism and/or Islamophobia are not the only reasons to engage in anti-circumcision polemics, their impact is undeniable. The negative image of circumcision employed in the 2012 circumcision debate and the centuries-old genealogy of anti-circumcision polemics, which this article tried to trace, continue to affect until the present day. The 2014 Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research nationwide survey on religious tolerance and the acceptance of Muslims in the German society showed that over 60 percent of the German population is in favor of banning the circumcision of boys for religious reasons (Foroutan et al. 2014:35–36). Despite legislation maintaining the legality of religious circumcision, the majority of the population continues to remain in opposition (Canan and Foroutan 2017:166). More than a century after the internal Jewish debates on circumcision, it is still debated who can be part of the nation and who cannot—how a German body can look like and how not.

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