**EUROPE, RELIGIONS AND STATE MODERNITY:**

**MENDELSSOHN’S VISION**

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| Received: 26/06/2022  Accepted: 22/08/2022  Published: 05/09/2022  DOI: 10.46473/WCSAJ27240606/08-09-2022-0005//full/html  Category: Research Paper |  | |

**ABSTRACT**

Religious ideas and beliefs not only suggest spiritual life, but inspire everyday life, the collective psyche. As for the elites, they can be better understood by the acknowledgement of both discontinuity (due to time and vocabulary) and continuity of their spiritual and cultural preoccupations. Moses Mendelssohn asserted a side of modernity without distancing from community culture limited to its own set of values. He was not free in relation to the traditions and history of his own community, and especially to religious dogma. In fact, Mendelssohn, in his own philosophy, associated the principles of the Old World to those of the new reality. On one hand, he was enticed by emancipation, civism and modernity, and on the other by the preservation of Jewish identity according to the ancient myths. Even if he was an enlightened spirit in the way he regarded the integration of Jews or social emancipation in general, Mendelssohn was not an advocate of interferences (of inter-culturality). He was not a successor of those free, open and creative Marranos of the fifteenth century – Spanish Jews converted to Christianity, preserving a part of old Judaic practices – and neither a follower of Spinoza’s new philosophy. Not incidentally, Voltaire better understood human nature, being a humanist in all aspects. The freedom of conscience could not and still cannot ignore the diversity of people and human groups, and neither can the associations or interferences among them who, in modernity, needed to cohabitate and cooperate, not only in order to survive, but to generate universal values.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, Mendelssohn’s reform, religious ideas, dogmatism, civism, Jewish emancipation, European modernity, multi-and interculturality.

# 1. The Ideal of the *Republic of Letters*

The dialogues that stirred the greatest interest in early modernity were between theology and philosophy, religion and politics, state and church. Following dogmatic controversies within the Catholic Church during the sixteenth century, the Reformation and its Counter Reformation, with great geographical and scientific discoveries along the way, the intellectuality of the eighteenth century would turn its focus on how religious practices are revealed or reasoned, and on secularism. The fresh range of ideas called Enlightenment would discuss the understanding of the Bibleby various religions, the method of analyzing the intentionof its authors. The first suggestions of modern research are formulated by Baruch Spinoza, in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the Enlightenment philosophers extending, deepening and spreading them. The criteria on which eighteenth- century scholars would promote are meant to justify or criticize the religious forms of manifestations, to seek the religious truth and formulate hypotheses regarding its approach. Then, both traditional and historical critical perspectives were accepted, the renewal of concepts and the continuity expressed by a new language. This is not a time, as often implied, when intellectuality embraces atheism, but one when the fundamentals of religious beliefs are reassessed, when new sciences are born or diversify, when the intellectuals and their institutional views are tolerant. The debut of secularism did not imply the abandonment of morality. The reforms take place both inside religions and churches, and within intellectual environments.

One of the great works too little considered by the history of modern ideas is that of Moses Mendelssohn, reformer of Judaism, often called the “Third Moses”. We will comment on his most important work, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism.* We can identify not only the reform of Judaism or the Jewish-Christian dialogue, but also the Enlightenment philosophy nurturing individual rights, freedom of thought and association, and European civility and modernity. How can one explain the link between the Enlightenment ideas and the examination by contextualization of the Mosaic religion? Can science be part of the paradigmatic revisions without disproving the traditional ideas and religious beliefs? Does the Enlightenment philosophy promote ambivalence, religion and science as ingredients of conscience? What are the similarities and differences between Jewish monotheist religion and the humanist culture of modern individual? In Mendelssohn’s case, is there a proper reform of Judaism related to its time and space, or just a separation of religion from civility? Is he the philosopher who contributes at the same time to the renewal of political thought among the Jewish and German environments?

The fact that European socio-cultural interferences are still contested today on religious, ethno-linguistic, ethno-nationalistic or racial criteria makes me consider the importance of analyzing the Judaic-Christian, Jewish-German and Jewish-European multi- and inter-culturalism. I am not talking about critical commentary on the ideologies of the “century of extremes”, but the research of ideas that enlivened the reflections of a number of intellectuals belonging to Mendelssohn’s family. We talk about the ideal of the *Republic of Letters*, with the aim of establishing a transcultural and civic Europe. In the absence of a new lecture of Enlightenment, we cannot properly understand the so-called *Sattelzeit*, the time of transition towards modernity, often mentioned by the historians of the Bielefeld School and especially its founder, Reinhart Koselleck, nor the paradigmatic transformations expressed by the political philosophy of the eighteenth century. Secondly, it is proper to debate the contradictions or confusions among the intellectual, civically minded values and religious dogmas. Thirdly, along the historical continuities, we must also understand the discontinuities. The contextualization in time and space is compulsory as soon as we aspire to understand the differences and similitudes among the Enlightenment projection of the *Republic of Letters* and Romantic myths, and the appeals for the ideal emancipation of the nationalities and exclusive practices of the national state. Emmanuel Levinas believed, in spite of the course of events and the frailty of European democratic institutions – which could not stop the nationalism, world wars, fascism, Nazism and Auschwitz – the Mendelssohnian ideal regarding freedom and human rights persists closely to the Jewish soul (Levinas, 1982, 10).

# 2. Moses Mendelssohn’s View upon State and Religions

There are numerous German editions of the book *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*. The excellent translations in international languages are accompanied by explanatory texts, demonstrating the echo of Mendelssohnian *Jerusalem* during the two and a half centuries since its first edition (1783)[[1]](#footnote-1). Much has been written about Moses Mendelssohn’s ideas, their contributions to the Enlightenment, and his interpretation of Judaism. Sometimes, only one of the two great themes of Mendelssohnian studies was preferred, which made interpretation questionable and criticism unfair. In spite of delimitations, the vast bibliography presenting his live and oeuvre left the gates open to hypotheses and interpretations[[2]](#footnote-2).

Our commentary derives from the perspective of historical science and political philosophy, regarding the problematization of the relation between church and state in the eighteenth century, the civility and religious doctrines, the conscience of the people of different cultures than the majority, or of one which is multi-coded. We focus on some of Mendelssohn’s ideas and explanations that particularized his ambivalent thought that formed the basis of his *Jerusalem.* The impressive Mendelssohnian creation influenced the intellectuality of the time, creating the premises of emancipation, for both Jews and Christians. It is one of the bright examples that can be referred to when we talk about the birth of modern Europe, the current European identity.

Jewish Westernization is a theme that some cultures have given less attention than deserved. The understanding of the Jewish-Christian relationship in Central and Western Europe during the age of Enlightenment points to the idea of social emancipation. Through studies devoted to one or another of the great contributors to the Enlightenment, we perceive how the modern world coagulated around certain values, and why the changes that occurred then still have a profound connection to cultural and community space and time, within all of the Western world including Europe. Mankind’s route from religious to civic conscience, from confessional to citizens’ political nation, is key to understanding the modern democratic world.

Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* insists upon one of the major themes of modernity, namely the separation of religious and secular life. A vast segment of his work deals with the clarification of the principles that guide spirituality and the civism. For example, it evaluates the rights and obligations of people, the goodwill, independence of thought and action, wisdom, responsibility, avoidance of conflicts, activation of rationality, capitalization of talent, understanding between individuals who form a family, the role of parents in their children’s education, and the role of religion/s in the transfer of values from one generation to another. Civility is not singularly situated at the core of his concerns. The theme that causes the greatest sensitivities within the intellectual and especially in the priestly communities is that referring to religious practices. Mendelssohn imagined a society in which the state offers equal rights to its citizens on one side, while respecting and protecting the freedom of conscience and different religious practices on the other.

*State and religion – civic and ecclesiastical constitution, secular and clerical authority – how to oppose these pillars of social life to one another so that they are in balance, and do not, instead become burdens on social life, or weight down on its foundations more than they help to uphold it – this is, from a political perspective, one of the most difficult tasks, which has been, for centuries, the object of many endeavours and which, here and there, was settled, maybe with greater success in practice than in theory. Some thought it proper to separate these different relations of societal man into moral entities, and to assign to each a separate province, specific rights, duties, powers and proprieties. But the extent of these different provinces and the boundaries dividing them has not been yet accurately established[[3]](#footnote-3)* (Mendelssohn, 2003, p. 15).

Seemingly taken from the manuals of the twenty-first century political science, the observation is ever present. The distinction between civility and religiosity, state and church authority, secularity and faith has been and still is an important issue of the social theory, for political thought and public administration. Especially where each of the two “constitutions” claimed the right to enforce its own law. Mendelssohn asserted that both institutions have their distinct roles in regulating human life, but added they cannot be mixed up, nor should they be mutually exclusive.

Mendelssohn explains how, under different pretences, the church or state look to expand their frontiers, both seeking absolute dominance. In this sense, he calls upon the Catholic Church, whose principles during his time continued to encourage the despotic attitude of the leaders. In the absence of clarifications regarding everybody’s roles, the interpersonal and intercommunity relations complicate, generating at first confusion, then conflict.

*When they take the field against each other, mankind is the victim of their discord; when they are in agreement, the noblest treasure of human felicity is lost; for they seldom agree but for the purpose of banishing from their realms a third moral entity, liberty of conscience, which knows how to derive some advantage from their disunity* (Mendelssohn, 2003, p 16)*.*

Where interpersonal relations require regulations, the temptation to simplify them appears with decisions that are opposed to human liberties. Neither the state institutions nor religious entities are exempt from these faults. Mendelssohn believes that a citizen’s freedom is essential, and neither the philosopher nor the politician or priest have any right to constrain it. The laws, and much less a single one, cannot change any religious belief, cannot contribute to the formation of personal conscience or the deliverance from material servitudes. They fail to provide sufficient freedom in any situations that confront the human nature. As for the rewards, they do not produce principles or habits capable of guiding the individual or the collective. Instead, the knowledge and the power of judgement contribute to the birth of principles and habits.

***3. Temporality vs. Eternity*?**

Starting from John Locke and his understanding of the concept of tolerance, Moses Mendelssohn claims that the state should be concerned over temporal prosperity and not over the moral convictions of its citizens, or their eternal bliss. The state doesn’t put into use the dogmas of religions, but tolerates any citizen that acts within his position as such. The state is a moderator that protects an individual’s freedom of conscience, enforcing the conditions for its exercise. The responsibility for the temporal is handled by civil authorities, namely the state, and that for eternity by the ecclesiastic authority, namely the church. To offer meaning to human existence, Mendelssohn claims that *eternity* must be understood by every human as equivalent to *continuous temporality*. Nothing ends with this life, the future being infinite. The worldly wealth does not oppose eternal happiness. Every present achievement is a preparation “for the things that will come”:

*Beware, though, of establishing any further opposition between this life and the future, and of leading men to think that their true welfare in this life is not one and the same as their eternal felicity in the future; that it is one thing to care for their temporal, and another to care for their eternal well-being, and it is possible to preserve one while neglecting the other. Delusions of this kind shift the viewpoint and the horizon of the weak-sighted man who has to walk along a narrow path; he is in danger of becoming dizzy and of stumbling on a level road. Thus many a man does not dare to enjoy the benefits bestowed by Providence in the here and now for fear of losing an equal portion in the hereafter, and many a man has become a bad citizen on earth in the hope of thereby becoming a better citizen of heaven* (Mendelssohn, 2003, pp. 23-25)*.*

The preoccupation for the clarification of notions is essential, proving Mendelssohn’s interest towards both the problematization of man’s life and the rational understanding of religious practice. He attributes a complementary meaning to earthly life and afterlife, to present and future, rejecting the opposition of the two temporalities; well-being and happiness is a permanent state. The thinker is concerned with the preservation of man and cultivation of religiousness, admitting the importance of temporal and eternal. Embracing the double role of theologian and philosopher, Mendelssohn claims that the church offers support for civil happiness – it has an educational role, expecting that the obligations towards other people should coincide with those towards God. He claims that “serving the state would be a real service to God” (Mendelssohn, 2003, pp 29-39). This seems to be in line with the everlasting values of Judaism. The pleading for modernity and emancipation has been an intellectual preoccupation, which in the second half of the eighteenth century appealed both to Christians and Jews, the two religious communities being able to live together within the same state and common administrative and judicial norms. It is a feature related to the liberalism of the Jewish circles of the time, to the aspirations of an important segment of Enlightenment intellectuality and the regimentation of modernity. Mendelssohn believes there is no conflict between human duties and those towards divinity; that man’s independence is not questioned by God, and human rights do not derive from offerings demanded by divinity:

*The moral education of reason is saintly, similar to religion … God does not need our assistance. He desires no service from us, no sacrifice of our rights for his benefit, no renunciation of our independence for his advantage. His rights can never come into conflict and confusion with ours. He wants only what is best for us, what is best for every single individual; and this must, evidently, be self-consistent, and cannot contradict itself* (Mendelssohn, 2003, p. 51)*.*

Despite this truth, Mendelssohn observes that starting from antiquity, the aforementioned principles have been violated constantly. The author of *Jerusalem* considers that religious ideas and beliefs, when acknowledged and honoured, are not a contradiction of human rights. If, however, there were misunderstandings and persecutions in the name of the church, these were owed to its so-called servants who, under the pretence of religion, have become its enemies. No violence, no constraint and no discrimination should be justifiable in the name of religion (Mendelssohn, 2003, p. 50).

***4.* Civism and Dogmatism**

Mendelssohn seems thoroughly affected by his own religious affiliation. His thinking is rigorous and liberal when pleading for the Jews’ civic rights. When talking about adopting another religion, he remains cautious and critical. He acknowledges the possible cohabitation of people of different religions, but not the freedom to change one’s principles by migrating to another religion. There is a fragment of his *Jerusalem* that the way he viewed marriages between people of different religions:

*When individuals of different religions enter into a state of matrimony, the principles according to which they will conduct their household and educate their children are agreed upon in the marriage contract. But what if the husband or wife changes his or her principles after marriage and converts to another religion? Does this give the other party the right to press for a divorce? ... If it is just a civil contract … then the provisions of the contract must be exposed and enforced by the contracting parties and not by the lawmaker or judge … Assuming that the whole State would have another opinion on that issue, this matter would have no influence upon the significance of the contract. The man changes his principles and adopts another religion. May it be, in this case, that the woman should enter a home that contravenes her conscience and educate her children according to some principles that she does not share?... It would be a certain injustice; by the delusion of the freedom of conscience, one can obviously reach the most absurd violation of conscience* (Mendelssohn, 2003, p. 40-41).

Mendelssohn advocated simplicity and the avoidance of coercion and bribes, opposing any exclusion based on religious criteria, the sanctions being unacceptable and impossible to associate with an authentic religion. However, when speaking of the freedom of conscience, his approach is conservative. The Mendelssohnian view reflects limitations of the time when modernity had begun, as reflected in the community-religious conditioning of the freedom of thought and association, acceptance of individual rights and freedoms and denial of secularism. Many are possible, but not the exchange of religion, not secularism and civility. According to the theologian, the morality of man, family and community are inconceivable outside one’s own religion. In spite of the openness for theological-philosophical dialogue, a vision influenced by the prolonged marginalisation or exclusion of Jews from public business still survives.

*If religion permits itself no arbitrary punishments, it should least of all allow this torture of the soul which, alas, is felt only by a person who truly has religion. Think of all the unfortunate ones who from time immemorial were supposed to have been improved by excommunication and damnation. Reader! To whatever visible church, synagogue, or mosque you may belong! See if you do not find more true religion among the host of the excommunicated than among the far greater host of those who excommunicated them? .... For what ecclesiastical excommunication or ban is without any civil consequences, without any influence, at least, upon the civil reputation, upon the good name, of the expelled and upon the trust placed in him by his fellow citizens, without which no one can pursue his occupation and be useful to his fellow men, that is, be civilly happy?* (Mendelssohn, 2003, pp. 71-72)*.*

In contrast to his peers, Mendelssohn understood the differences between religious ideas and beliefs and social practices. He was adept in preserving his own religion, refusing to see a connection between religious and social tradition. His reflections were not triggered by atheism, but in turn highlighted the importance of knowledge, critical attitudes towards the mysticism and obscure ideologies from the Middle Ages. The observations regarding man’s double nature, the blend between “sublime and abject”, “greatness and misery”, are worthy considerations from his renowned book *Jerusalem*. This tells us something about the mind-set of the eighteenth century. It is what Ernst Cassirer underlines in his book dedicated to the Enlightenment as being an indisputable aspect of the time.

Mendelssohn was not exempt from numerous critical observations. If during his lifetime most were comradely, during the twentieth century and especially after the Jewish Holocaust, they were severe. For example, Gershom Scholem refused to see Mendelssohn’s work as one that facilitated the German-Jewish dialogue. Such a dialogue, observed the exegete of Kabballah, presumed the existence of two persons listening to each other, both eager to take into consideration the opinion of the other. The historian says this didn’t happen at that time or later. Scholem’s thesis takes into consideration and criticizes mostly the religious content of Mendelssohn’s comments. He is not interested in the political philosophy or Enlightenment ideas, much less the liberalism professed by the Jewish-German philosopher[[4]](#footnote-4). Mendelssohn had not only friends, but also numerous partners in dialogue. He had been acknowledged by his colleagues as an exceptional contributor to German and European Enlightenment. He was pleading for liberty as a right and obligation of people, as opportunity for an active and creative life (Levinas, 1982, p. 10). His philosophical studies observed the social and cultural-linguistic emancipation in the sense of the Enlightenment. He was an *Aufklärer*, a scholar-philosopher, a thinker who respected the traits of his own community but also the issues that tormented Europe at the time. The limitations of his thought derive from the constraints of a *Homo Religiosus* whose beliefs were never deserted in favour of total renewal. When Scholem refers to religious debate within the culture of dialogue, he is right, as soon as we take into consideration the restrictions enforced by *Homo Religiosus* in both Jewish and Christian environments. With the exception of a few intellectuals for whom freedom of thought was essential in all aspects, the Western European cultural and political circles of the eighteenth century were still far from understanding and accepting the similarities, symbols and common spiritual aspirations, regardless of the practiced religion.

It is desirable that those who re-evaluate Mendelssohn’s work could observe his suggested reforms for the Jews echoed in the climate of Western Christianity. The debut of the transition towards modernity is related to the debates of ideas and ideological complications (and sometimes confusion) that involved the scholars of the time. In many of his writings, Mendelssohn cultivated the principles according to which people could pursue change, modernity and peaceful cohabitation. If he advocated religious convergence, he had to give up Judaism under the definition of his predecessors. Or he was a rabbi’s son, an adept of the Torah and Talmud and an unflagging keeper of his community’s traditions. His European colleagues paid attention to him for his critical and rational intellectual contributions to feudal servitudes and obsolete state organization, and less for his religious allegiance. His reforming perspectives introduced plausible arguments regarding the concept of natural law.

**4. A Possible Conclusion: Interconfessionality and Interculturality**

Mendelssohn’s attitude is not singular within the European context of the eighteenth century. Comparing his ideas to those from the French Enlightenment underlines the spirit of an age in which the reconsideration of the meaning of spiritual life was fundamental, contributing to paradigmatic renewals and placement of man in a new time of existence. Concerned by contradictions between social life and religious practices, the Enlightenment philosophy examined possible ways to regulate the tolerance levels of people and diverse communities. It searched for and identified examples in antique law, observing that the Roman law had oppressed nobody for his feelings (Voltaire, 1989, p. 22).

Other Enlightenment thinkers were involved in philosophical debates surrounding the relationship between man and divinity. Voltaire’s *Prière à Dieu* (Prayer to God) tolerates diversity of religious practices for the benefit of the common good. Voltaire has a different view than Mendelssohn, appealing for a private meaning of religion, an ethics of peaceful cohabitation among humans, which leads him to admit the differences between people’s habits are minor. He lets us understand that law or religious dogmas, no matter how well-written or assumed, are imperfect. Thus, vanity in the name of one or another (dogma controversies) is opposite to belief in divinity. Neither the white robe nor the black one, neither the old nor the new language, must impede us to see interferences or similarities.

*It is no longer to people that I speak; it is to you, God of all beings, of all worlds, and of all times: if we feeble creatures, lost in the immensity of the universe, and invisible to the rest of it, are allowed to ask anything of you, you who have given everything and whose decrees are as unchanging as they are eternal, then may you deign to have pity on the errors inherent in our nature; may these errors not be our undoing. You did not give us a heart so that we could hate each other, nor hands so we could slit each other’s throats; help us to help each other endure the burden of this painful and brief life; may the tiny differences between the clothes which cover our feeble bodies, between our inadequate languages, between our ridiculous customs, between all our imperfect laws, our absurd opinions, between all our circumstances, so disproportionate in our eyes and yet so equal before yours; may all these tiny variations which differentiate the atoms called humans not be the triggers of hatred and persecution; may those who light candles at midday in adoration of you learn to tolerate those who simply bask in the light of your sun; may those who wrap a white cloth round their robes to express the command to love you not hate those who say the same thing under a coat of black wool; may it be equally acceptable to adore you in the jargon of an ancient language or of a more recent one; may those whose clothes are dyed red or violet and who rule over a small plot on a little heap of the mud of this world, and who happen to possess some rounded pieces of a certain metal, enjoy what they call greatness and riches without pride, and may others view them without envy: for you know that there is nothing to envy or boast about in these vanities* (Voltaire, 1989: pp. 141-2).

Where progress has occurred within society in which modernity has become a way of living, with its freedom of thought, association and innovation, we can talk of conscience and plurality, not of ideological or religious-dogmatic uniqueness. Learning to think for himself, the person has integrated in the community that fulfils his own aspirations. Shortcomings and dissatisfactions occurred where one of the two constitutions or types of conscience negated the other or wished to enforce by seniority, origins or imaginary continuities, myths and laws developed from legends, or number of adherents or sympathisers. The development of the modern conscience is not just the result of earned freedoms, but also the accumulation of a set of values, the assumption of multi-coded cultural legacies. The citizen and society of a state imply cohabitation and thus the amalgamation of cultural and, why not, religious values. During the Renaissance, man proved for the first time the vocation of amalgamation, not only of languages or cultures, but of symbols belonging to monotheist religions. The case of the golden centuries of the Iberian Peninsula is not singular, but still relevant – sometimes to survive in a hostile world, other times, for the freedom of acting according to man’s own interest.

It happened that religious ideas and beliefs not only suggest spiritual life, but inspire everyday life, the collective psyche. As for the elites, they can be better understood by the acknowledgement of both discontinuity (due to time and vocabulary) and continuity of their spiritual and cultural preoccupations. They can be understood also by the connection between society and the economy, in every historical time. Moses Mendelssohn asserted a side of modernity without distancing from community culture limited to its own set of values. He was not free in relation to the traditions and history of his own community, and especially to religious dogma. In fact, Mendelssohn, in his own philosophy, associated the principles of the Old World to those of the new reality. On one hand, he was enticed by emancipation, civism and modernity, and on the other by the preservation of Jewish identity according to the ancient myths. Even if he was an enlightened spirit in the way he regarded the integration of Jews or social emancipation in general, Mendelssohn was not an advocate of interferences (of inter-culturalism). He was not a successor of those free, open and creative Marranos of the fifteenth century – Spanish Jews converted to Christianity, preserving a part of old Judaic practices – and neither a follower of Spinoza’s new philosophy. Not incidentally, Voltaire better understood human nature, being a humanist in all aspects. The freedom of conscience could not and still cannot ignore the diversity of people and human groups, and neither can the associations or interferences among them who, in modernity, needed to cohabitate and cooperate, not only in order to survive, but to generate universal values.

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1. The first Romanian translation of this book was printed by Hasefer Publishing in the year 2003, by Jeanina Ianoși. During a discussion with Prof. Ion Ianoși at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Bucharest in 1992, he signaled the importance of Moses Mendelssohn’s work for understanding Jewish emancipation, but also for the evolution of modern ideas in general. He mostly mentioned the book *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, which had not been translated into Romanian at the time, and which the philosopher advised to be researched and valued. By then, I already had the opportunity to study part of Mendelssohn’s writings in the Enlightenment library in Wolfenbüttel, having access to the first editions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See a vast amount of the bibliographic sources regarding Mendelssohn’s life and work in Bourel (2004, 527-630). Our references are linked to some of the most well-known studies regarding the Jewish-German scholar and the Enlightenment. The analysis and work hypotheses are based on *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All the quotations in this paper were translated from Rumanian to English by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mendelssohn was the first unconverted Jew who became a prominent German-language author, a Jew who presented himself as such to the German audience. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)