

Conference report for The Academic Study Group – Europe and the Middle East

**Enlightenment beyond Radicalism:
Reasserting the Role of Faith in Enlightened Thought**

University of Haifa, 4-6 January 2015

Convened by

Fania Oz-Salzberger
(University of Haifa)

Avi Lifschitz
(University College London)

The main idea behind this event was to get academics talking (and especially listening) to each other on a major issue in eighteenth-century studies, concerning various disciplines from literature and philosophy to history and political science: the changing contours of Enlightenment thought and whether it was as radical as its popular image would have us believe.

Eighteenth-century studies witnessed in the last decade the intensification of scholarly interest in the status of religion in the Enlightenment. Although Jonathan Israel's large-scale project traces the roots of modernity to a minority of radical authors who refused to make any compromise with accepted theological dogmas, J. G. A. Pocock's ongoing work on the contexts of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* suggests a distinctly theological grounding for a particular sort of Enlightenment. David Sorkin attempted to map a 'religious Enlightenment' across confessional divides and geographic-linguistic differences; Jonathan Sheehan argued that the origins of the 'Enlightenment Bible' lay not only in modern criticism but also in the activities of such religious sects as the Pietists. The growing shelf of studies tracing the reception of Scottish and French ideas by the German and central-European Enlightenments suggests that religious discourse held sway in the translations and discussions of purportedly secular bodies of thought. Additionally, recent multi-authored volumes explore the contours of what they describe as a cross-European Catholic Enlightenment. It is now difficult to ignore the manifest presence of clergymen, theologically-minded scholars, and religious language and frames of mind in almost all venues of the public sphere in the eighteenth century, from coffee houses and salons to masonic lodges. Consequently, Enlightenment scholarship today faces the need for new and subtle examination of the multiple interfaces of religious and irreligious Enlightenment thought.

To discuss these issues, a group of seven experts in eighteenth-century thought based in UK institutions joined seven Israeli scholars, as well as a German colleague and Israeli postdocs based in Germany, on 4-6 January 2015 at the University of Haifa. (Further scholars from the University of Haifa and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem were involved as session chairs and members of

the audience.) Our guiding question was the relationship between personal faith, religious dogma, established churches, and Enlightenment thought in various locations across Europe. The conference examined this problem against the background of different confessions (Judaism, Catholicism, Anglicanism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism) and geographical configurations: Scandinavia, Scotland, England, Germany, France, Italy, Poland, and the nascent United States.

The event was opened by a well-attended keynote lecture by John Robertson, holder of the chair of the history of political thought at Cambridge, who offered a panoramic overview of the persistence and hitherto neglected salience of sacred history in Enlightenment thought from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century. The engaging lecture and subsequent Q&A session, which took place at the Keller House – the first residential home on the Carmel, built by Friedrich Keller of the Haifa Templar Colony – was followed by a festive dinner for speakers and chairs at a venue with an unmatched view of the Haifa bay and port.

The discussions over the following two days took place at the Rabin Observatory at the campus of the University of Haifa on Mount Carmel, at the southern end of the city bordering on green natural reserves. Enjoying a spectacular view of the Galilee and the Mediterranean coast despite the unusually stormy weather, participants discussed the peculiar configurations of faith among the scholars of the Huguenot diaspora in Europe (Myriam Yardeni, a founding mother of the History Department at Haifa and laureate of the prestigious Israel Prize) as well as in Scandinavia (Knud Haakonssen, former director of the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History and Professor of Intellectual History at St Andrews). The Scottish Enlightenment's treatment of revealed religion and the ancient Israelites was expertly covered in papers by Thomas Ahnert (University of Edinburgh) and Fania Oz-Salzberger (University of Haifa). Zur Shalev (University of Haifa) provided an original angle by emphasising the lingering influence of religious frames of mind and symbolism in so-called 'Enlightened' mapping and geography; Avi Lifschitz (UCL) pondered the use of biblical anthropology in the German Enlightenment. The English debates between 'moderates' (Burke and Gibbon) and radicals (Price and Priestley) were shrewdly analysed in a paper by Brian Young (University of Oxford), who sought to overturn Jonathan Israel's positive view of the radicals. For his part, Eran Shalev (University of Haifa) demonstrated the vast range of references and the undeniable symbolic presence of religious tropes and images in the speeches and pamphlets of the American Revolutionary period. This rich and challenging day was concluded by a shorter session in which three early-career scholars, mostly Israelis, presented their work and engaged with the overall theme of the conference.

The final day included a fascinating cluster of papers on the Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah. Andrea Schatz (King's College London) questioned the notion of the secularisation of Jewish time by reference to various works by the Maskilim, while Shmuel Feiner (Bar Ilan University) – arguably the foremost Israeli scholar of the Haskalah – insisted on the revolutionary character of the Enlightenment in the Jewish world. Somewhat challenging the assumption behind many of the other papers, Feiner's thesis provided a bone of contention

which kept engaging the audience throughout the day. Gideon Freudenthal (Tel Aviv University) was more sceptical about the secularising aspirations of major Maskilim, among them Moses Mendelssohn, while concentrating more firmly on questions of dogma in comparison to Feiner's emphasis on socio-cultural processes.

Subsequently Alexander Schmidt (Jena, funded by the Haifa Center for German and European Studies) outlined how the religious notion of a community of believers was transformed by Fichte and Herder into the model of a cultural-national public. Richard Butterwick-Pawlikowski (University College London and the College of Europe, Warsaw) provided a much-needed terminological warning by examining the difference between Enlightened Catholicism and Catholic Enlightenment from a Polish perspective. Harvey Chisick (University of Haifa) concluded the day by reassessing the 'radical Enlightenment' paradigm in relation to the French Enlightenment.

The conference ended by an expertly led excursion to the ancient Jewish necropolis of Beth She'arim and to the Christian sites in Nazareth, where participants were treated to an Arab dinner. The general feedback received from the participants exceeded all our expectations. Various participants, especially those who visited Israel for the first time, were thoroughly impressed. Professor Butterwick-Pawlikowski, for example, took the time to write to us after his departure that "It was one of the most enjoyable and useful conferences I have ever attended", also mentioning that he looked forward to revisiting Israel. John Robertson wrote to thank us for "a continually interesting, instructive and inspiring conference". Andrea Schatz is about to invite Gideon Freudenthal to speak at her seminar at the Institute of Historical Research in London, and we hope that further academic and social ties will have emerged from this event.

On this note, we would like to express our gratitude to John Levy, the Academic Study Group, and the British Friends of the University of Haifa for their initiative and generosity in funding the conference.

Avi Lifschitz and Fania Oz-Salzberger
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