



## Progressive Judaism

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

### Citation for published version (APA):

Langton, D., Azari, N. P. (Ed.), Runehov, A. (Ed.), & Oviedo, L. (Ed.) (2013). Progressive Judaism. In *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions* (pp. 1858-1866). Springer Nature.

### Published in:

Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions

### Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact [uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk) providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



---

## Progressive Judaism

Daniel R. Langton  
Department of Religions and Theology,  
University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

### Related Terms

[Liberal Judaism](#); [Reconstructionist Judaism](#);  
[Reform Judaism](#)

### Description

Progressive Judaism is a term given to describe a variety of Jewish religious groups and movements which, since the nineteenth century, have sought to reconcile their faith with modernity in a deliberate, programmatic way, usually in explicit contradistinction to traditional understandings of Judaism. They include, among others, Reform Jews, Liberal Jews, and Reconstructionist Jews, who, having disassociated themselves from the authority of Jewish tradition to a lesser or greater extent, have come to represent a wide spectrum of views with regard to theology and practice. It is worth noting that the labels can have different meanings in different places; for example, Liberal Judaism in Britain roughly corresponds to Reform in the USA, while Anglo-Reform is closer to US Conservative Judaism. Today, according to the statistics reported by the World Union of Progressive Judaism, there are more than 45 countries with Progressive congregations, around 1,200 Progressive, Liberal, Reform, and Reconstructionist congregations around the world, and approximately 1.8 m people affiliated with the World Union's constituent movements globally.

The Reform movement had its origin in the eighteenth century European Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon rationality and humanism. The Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskalah*, was characterized by an interest in secular studies, such as philosophy, literature, and languages, and an obsession with raising the intellectual

mores of Jews in order to justify the hopes for political and social emancipation. One towering figure stood out on this stage, the Orthodox Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), who redefined Judaism in its tribal particularities as “revealed legislation” but who emphasized that Judaism's essential teachings, including its belief in a creator-God, its ethics, and its hope of eternal life, were universal truths available to all mankind through the proper application of reason. In a Romantic-era reaction to the Enlightenment in the nineteenth century, a number of Jewish scholars, including Leopold Zunz (1794–1886) and Heinrich Graetz (1817–1991), established a more historically orientated approach to Judaism known as the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (or scientific study of Judaism), which came to regard Jewish identity as the sum of Jewish history. Such an approach dispensed with the ideas of divine legislation and a chosen people, and effectively adopted a materialist methodology that refrained from bringing in a supernatural dimension for explaining historical developments.

From these intellectual beginnings emerged the Reform movement, which had taken institutional form in Germany, the USA, England, and France by the 1840s, although the earliest stirrings occurred in Germany in the 1810s. By the 1880s, Reform would dominate North American synagogal life, while it would only ever be a denominational minority elsewhere. There is a debate among scholars as to the precise motivations and driving forces behind these progressive developments in each country, with greater or lesser weight being given to the political ambitions of assimilationist lay Jews, the influence of religious leaders and intellectual pioneers of Reform, and the critique and emulation of the surrounding Christian societies. In any case, with few exceptions the reforms adopted tended to be a mixture of theological and ritual innovations that divided wider Jewish opinion. By deliberately contrasting themselves with the traditionalists, the reformers provoked the rise of what would now be described as ultra-orthodoxy and neo-Orthodox Judaism, the first of which seeks to turn inward and away from the profane

world and its secular knowledge, and the second of which seeks to engage cautiously with it, adopting and adapting those aspects of modernity that, it is believed, can be reconciled with Jewish tradition without causing violence to it.

What were the reforms? At first, the changes were focused on manners and decorum in synagogue services, and on conforming to wider societal (i.e., Christian) norms of behavior. The use of the vernacular in the liturgy was encouraged at the expense of Hebrew, the services themselves were shortened, music was frequently included, and it became possible in some places for men and women to sit together. Reform “ministers” dressed like Christian clergy and the balance of their role shifted away from Talmudic learning and *halakhic* (legal) expertise toward sermonizing and pastoral care. Many reformers became ideologically relaxed when it came to observing *kashrut* (food laws) or the festivals and Sabbath in accordance with rabbinic tradition. Some adopted the practice of bringing newborn babies to synagogue for a blessing (like a christening), and of praying bare-headed (as was the Christian practice), and many replaced the *bar mitzvah* ceremony, that is, the rite of passage at which a boy reads publically from the Torah scroll for the first time, with the confirmation service at which a boy’s knowledge of the religious teachings and duties of Judaism were tested (like a catechism). In the USA, in particular, the idea of celebrating the Sabbath on a Sunday was actively advocated. Of course, many of these reforms in behavior implied subtle (and not so subtle) shifts in thought, and it was not long before these were made explicit, leading to more abstract theological innovations being introduced and debated, such as challenging the divine origins of the ► *Torah* or Law, or transforming the future hope of a Messiah into that of a messianic age, or propounding the universalist message of Judaism (“the Mission of Israel”) in contrast to its commonly perceived particularity, or emphasizing the idea of Judaism as a religion against the view of the Jews as a nation in reluctant exile, with the dangerous implication that they could not be trusted as patriotic citizens of England, France, or Germany.

It would be these theological developments, and the sense of intellectual and religious freedom, that would prove so important in the long run, since many of the new practices, especially those relating to decorum, would be adopted by the traditionalists.

In Germany, which took the lead in the movement, two distinctive positions emerged in the classic Reform period, usually associated with the *Wissenschaft* scholar-rabbis, Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Samuel Holdheim (1806–1860), both of whom understood Judaism primarily in terms of moral law and monotheism. Whereas Geiger viewed Reform Judaism as the latest expression of an evolutionary development, Holdheim was more revolutionary in his justification for change. For Geiger, history revealed how each generation of Jews had given fresh meaning to the traditional liturgy and practices that had sought to express the core ethical-monotheistic aspects of Judaism, leading to a perpetual state of organic change as the Jewish religion adapted itself to local circumstances and cultures. In this account of “progressive revelation,” modern Jews, who had evolved from a tribal nation to become the proponents of a religious system, had engaged with and developed the rabbinic traditions of medieval Jewry, just as their ancestors had engaged with and developed the traditions of Biblical Judaism. Thus Geiger reinterpreted the traditional expectation of a Messiah to liberate the Jews as a future messianic age of spiritual enlightenment. For Holdheim, history suggested that the destruction of the Second Temple and of Jerusalem in antiquity had brought to an end the need for the civil and ritual laws of Biblical Judaism. It followed that Rabbinic or Talmudic Judaism, which had remained mired in the ceremonial laws originating with the Temple and the Jewish State, had lost its way. What was called for now was a radical break with the past, and a recognition that only the moral teachings of the *Torah* were worth preserving. Holdheim felt he could justify the abolition of the ceremonial laws with the coming of the messianic age, which had been made manifest in modern Jewish political emancipation.

## Sources of Authority

Arguably, the Reform movement organized itself according to two principles that define all modernizing variants of Judaism: progress and autonomy. From the *Haskalah* came the prioritization of human reason and autonomy, and from the *Wissenschaft* came the historicist view of the Jewish past, including its traditions and its sacred texts, as developments brought about by mundane historical-cultural forces. The recognition that the human intellect and its conception of religion had progressed over time persuaded reforming Jews, as individuals and as congregations, that they possessed all the authority they needed to define Judaism for themselves in their own day. Thus, reformers came to view the traditional sources of Jewish authority, that is, the *Torah* or the Bible, in a very different way from traditionalists. It came to be seen as encapsulating a variety of distinct, often contradictory, stages in Jewish history, thought and ethics, rather than as an integrated, unified body of religious revelation that was the foundation of Orthodox thought. Many modernists adopted the findings of biblical-criticism with relish, delighting in their newfound freedom to dismiss the morally and scientifically challenging aspects of the scriptures as manifestations of the unenlightened chauvinism and ignorance of earlier ages. The divine Law revealed at Sinai might be said to have originated in Heaven (*Torah min Ha-Shamayim*), but this should not be interpreted in a simplistic or naive fashion; even if inspired by God, the Law had been mediated by flawed human agents. Modern biblical scholarship with its concerns for the identification of multiple authors, contextual history, and linguistic mastery of the sources was a tool by which one might uncover the ethical principles that represented the authentic understanding or essence of Judaism. Such an approach would free it from the biases and errors that had, in the past, necessitated extensive theological gymnastics by traditional defenders of the truth and moral authority of God's divinely revealed *Torah*. With regard to their attitude toward the enormous body of rabbinic laws and traditions, including the Mishnah and the Babylonian and

Jerusalem Talmuds, the reformers adopted a range of different views, from those following Geiger, who regarded such literature as historically, culturally, and religiously significant feature of Jewish tradition, still of value for Jews today, to those more in sympathy with Holdheim, who was impatient and dismissive of what he saw as a primitive, misguided conception of Jewish religion, best forgotten. Generally speaking, the *Halakhah*, that is, the religious law, has not possessed the binding force or authoritative status for progressive Jews that it has for the Orthodox. At the same time, progressive Jews have tended to display an active interest in non-Jewish thought as (potentially, at least) authoritative sources of knowledge that can be synthesized with or understood to complement Jewish thought, especially in the realms of morality, ethics and science.

## Key Values

Here, as elsewhere, the autonomy and commitment to change so prized by reformers has led to a range of views. In the US, Reform was split between moderate leaders such as Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) and the followers of Holdheim's radicalism, such as David Einhorn (1809–1879). Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were a series of rabbinic conferences or platforms which codified in an authoritative way the key values of the reformers. The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, convened under Kaufmann Kohler (1843–1926), showed the radicals to be in the ascendant at that time, declaring that "we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization." Mosaic and rabbinic laws had "originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state" and these were denounced in that "their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation." They declared themselves to be a religion, rather than a nation, and thus distanced themselves from Zionism and the political hope

for a Jewish State. Judaism was presented as “a progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason,” and, along with Christianity and Islam, was concerned to promote “monotheistic and moral truth.” By 1937 and the Columbus Platform, however, there had been a retreat from some of these positions, such that the land of Israel was now embraced as a profound expression of Jewish identity (“Judaism is the soul of which Israel is the body... a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life”). The text, drafted by Samuel S. Cohen (1888–1959), also willingly admitted that many traditions had been too easily set aside in the past:

Judaism as a way of life requires *in addition to its moral and spiritual demands*, the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals and Holy Days, the retention and development of such customs, symbols and ceremonies as possess inspirational value, the cultivation of distinctive forms of religious art and music and the use of Hebrew, together with the vernacular, in our worship and instruction.

This trend can continue to be traced in the 1976 statement “Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective,” in which the authors, led by Eugene Borowitz (1924–), identified a number of historical experiences (including threats to political freedom, the explosion of new knowledge and technologies, and the spiritual emptiness of much of Western culture) that “taught us to be less dependent on the values of our society and to reassert what remains perennially valid in Judaism’s teaching.” At the same time, the Holocaust was seen to have “shattered our easy optimism about humanity and its inevitable progress” so that even while Jews remain committed to the hope for the messianic fulfillment of humanity yet “we have learned that the survival of the Jewish people is of highest priority.” The emphasis on the universalist values enshrined in the “mission of Israel” to humanity was also tempered somewhat by the realization that Jews continued to be regarded as a people apart and viewed with hostility by so many.

Early Reform Jews, newly admitted to general society and seeing in this the evidence of a growing universalism, regularly spoke of Jewish purpose in terms of Jewry’s service to humanity...

Until the recent past our obligations to the Jewish people and to all humanity seemed congruent. At times now these two imperatives appear to conflict. We know of no simple way to resolve such tensions. We must, however, confront them without abandoning either of our commitments. A universal concern for humanity unaccompanied by a devotion to our particular people is self-destructive; a passion for our people without involvement in humankind contradicts what the prophets have meant to us... Previous generations of Reform Jews had unbound confidence in humanity’s potential for good. We have lived through terrible tragedy and been compelled to reappropriate our tradition’s realism about the human capacity for evil.

And while there was frustration that, in the face of Orthodox opposition, Reform Judaism had not yet been recognized as a legitimate expression of Judaism within Israel, such political frustrations could not weaken the loyalty Reform Jews felt towards the “newly reborn” Jewish State to which they were bound “by innumerable religious and ethnic ties,” nor would it prevent them from encouraging individual Jews to make *aliyah* (that is, to emigrate to the land of Israel). Likewise, the 1999 “Statement of Principles of Reform Judaism” (drafted by Richard Levy) with its tri-part focus on God, the *Torah* and the land of Israel, sought to reassert traditional and Zionist values alongside the classic reformist ones. In contrast to official declarations before it, no mention is made of modern biblical-critical understandings of the *Torah*, preferring to highlight its role as the foundation of Jewish life; to “cherish the truths revealed in Torah” about God’s ongoing revelation to the Jews and the record of their ongoing relationship with God; and to view it rather as a manifestation of *ahavat olam*, God’s eternal love for the Jewish people and for humanity. With regard to traditional ritual, the Statement noted that while “some of these *mitzvot*, sacred obligations, have long been observed by Reform Jews, others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times.”

In Britain, the Reform movement developed in a quite different direction. David Wolf-Marks (1811–1909), the first minister of the first Anglo-Reform synagogue, had internalized the

criticism of traditional Judaism voiced by many evangelical Christians. He sought to bring Judaism back to what he saw as its core beliefs of the Bible, and dismissed the rabbinic traditions as a kind of corruption. Unlike in the US and Germany, Anglo-Reform Judaism's emphasis upon reason did not result in the adoption of biblical criticism, which would have undermined the authority of the Word of God, and it was left to Claude Montefiore (1858–1938), co-founder with Lily Montagu (1873–1963) of Anglo-Liberal Judaism, to reform Reform around the turn of the century by injecting it with a more historical-critical character. Montefiore was also one of the pioneers of interfaith dialogue, an activity that has enthused progressive Jews much more than it has Orthodox Jews. As Montefiore saw it, not all the light has shone through Jewish windows, and this led him not only to dialogue with religious thinkers of other faiths, but also to become one of the first critically-acclaimed Jewish experts in New Testament studies and one of the earliest proponents of the Jewish reclamation of Jesus as a good Jew. Britain was also important in terms of drawing together from across the world those who shared a common set of progressive values, for it was Montagu who established the World Union of Progressive Judaism in 1926. Both Anglo-Liberal Judaism and the WUPJ continue to this day to champion the progressive Jewish interest in those truths that can be found in teachings outside of Jewish tradition, together with a profound commitment to the development of Jewish-Christian relations. Ironically, when it comes to official institutional interfaith representation, progressive Judaism is often sidelined by Christian partners in dialogue in an attempt to avoid offending the sensibilities of Orthodox Judaism, with whom the majority of British Jews are affiliated.

It is also worth noting Reconstructionism, a denomination that emerged in the US in the early twentieth-century and which is often viewed as a kind of compromise between Jewish religion and Jewish secularism. Its founding figure, Mordechai Kaplan (1881–1983), a Conservative-trained rabbi, came to believe that, as

a result of modern developments in philosophy, science and history, the theology of Jewish tradition was largely redundant. He established the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in 1922 and published *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934. Essentially, Kaplan's vision of Judaism rejected supernaturalism while remaining committed to the Jewish community, such that Jewish religious life was to be maintained without any belief in a personal, supernatural deity or in His revealed Law. "God" was to be understood to be a metaphor, the sum of all natural processes that allow man to become self-fulfilled. Other reconstructionist teachings included the ideas that Judaism should be regarded as a continuously evolving religious civilization, an all-embracing way of life incorporating languages, literature, customs, civil and criminal law, art, music, and food; that the authority of religious observance comes from its status as the historical manifestation of the will of the Jewish people; and that the synagogue is regarded as a centre for communal activity. While it has not been successful in terms of affiliated numbers, in terms of its teachings it has undoubtedly influenced many other progressive Jews.

There has always existed a tension within progressive Jewish communities between the competing values of traditional religious authority and what might be described as the humanistic, liberalizing agenda. It seems fair to say that the Reform platforms considered above record a return to tradition that would have left some of the more radical founding fathers dismayed. In particular, there has been an acceptance of the significance of the Land to Judaism and an acknowledgement of the State of Israel as a legitimate element of modern Jewish identity, an increasing use of Hebrew in the liturgy, and renewal movements that emphasize traditional approaches to religious observance and Talmudic study. But as has been made clear by the principal organization of Reform in the US and Canada, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, personal autonomy still has precedence over authority of these platforms. And this principle holds true of other progressive groups, too.

## Ethical Principles

From the beginning, Reform-minded Jews saw themselves as the guardians of ethical monotheism, a belief in one God who cares for humans and who expects them to care about each other, in contrast with the ceremonial law which was understood to lie at the heart of traditional Judaism. While none of the progressive Jewish denominations have been comfortable with creeds or mandatory lists of principles from which they can be said to derive their ethical worldview, a number of common beliefs do appear in their writings and statements of purpose. There is the idea of the “Mission of Israel,” that is, the responsibility to promulgate to the nations of the world the teaching of the unity of God as described in the *Shema* (“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one”). Along with a view of the *Torah* as the co-product of divine inspiration and human agency in the distant past, there is an optimism in the rationality of humanity that makes it an obligation to interpret and re-interpret this source of moral guidance appropriately for each generation. And there is a commitment to the social justice taught by the Hebrew prophets and embodied in the concept of *Tikkun Olam* (that is, mending or rebuilding the world), which is itself closely associated to the ancient hope for a future messianic age of peace for all humankind. It is worth remembering that Kaplan, the father of Reconstructionist Judaism, defined God as “the power that makes for human salvation” and by this he meant, among other things, that “to believe in God means to take for granted that it is man’s destiny to rise above the brute and to eliminate all forms of violence and exploitation from human society.” (*Judaism without Supernaturalism*, 1958).

Historically, progressive Jews have celebrated the Bible and rabbinic literature as enshrining the basic ethical framework for the Jew, although they have always reserved the right to censor the moralistic teachings of the Jewish traditions and to modify them in the light of modern ethical sensibilities. The Pittsburgh Platform (1885) focused on the disparity of wealth, deeming it

“our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.” The Columbus Platform (1937) gave an even higher priority to defining Reform’s ethical worldview. Judaism was described as blending religion and morality into “an indissoluble unity,” with the love of God defined in terms of one’s love of fellow men. Social justice was sought by applying the teachings of Judaism to economic order, industry, and to national and international affairs. Jewish religion was presented as working towards a social order which protects men from material disabilities of old age, sickness, and unemployment and, and it cited the prophets’ ideal of universal peace, as committed to the moral education, love and sympathy necessary “to secure human progress.” The 1976 statement “Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective” reflected upon the successes of the Reform movement in the century since the establishment of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the rabbinical training centre Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. According to this account, one of its proudest achievements was that its teaching “that the ethics of universalism implicit in traditional Judaism must be an explicit part of our Jewish duty, [and] that women have full rights to practice Judaism” now appeared “self-evident to most Jews.”

In relation to wider cultural debates, progressive Jews have tended to adopt a socially liberal approach towards gender-equality (women Reform rabbis were ordained in the US in 1972 and in Britain in 1976), to abortion, to civil divorce, and to homosexuality (with many groups fully supportive of gay marriage and accepting of gay rabbis and cantors). Large numbers were involved in the US civil rights movement and the peace movement, and many have approached the Israeli-Palestinian problem by asserting their commitment to justice for what they see as the wrongs perpetrated against Palestinians as an expression of their commitment to prophetic and religious Zionist ideals.

## Characteristics

While the idea of “the Judeo-Christian tradition” is often exaggerated, in many ways Judaism and Christianity are the most similar of the world religions, in large part because they emerged from a common ancestor in the first century. They share much of their scriptures (although they read the Hebrew Bible very differently, and they have each generated the later sacred writings of the Talmuds and the New Testament respectively) and they also share much of their ethical codes (despite the fact that many critics of Judaism contrast the so-called New Testament God of Love with the Old Testament God of Judgment). Of course they do differ on core issues such what is meant by the unity of God, who or what is the Messiah, who are the true people of Israel, and whether the *Torah* or Law has been abrogated. Other important differences include the complicated reality that Judaism tends to be defined as both a religion *and* in relation to the Jews as a people, rather than as a religion per se, and the importance of *Eretz Yisrael*, that is, the Land of Israel, to the majority of Jews, which strikes many Christians as an unspiritual obsession. When it comes to traditional teachings such as the role of women, the belief in the afterlife, or the divine nature of scripture, progressive forms of Judaism can often appear to share more in common with progressive forms of Christianity than with their more conservative co-religionists.

Progressive Jews differ amongst themselves regarding their professed beliefs, but this is rarely regarded as a problem since diversity is understood to be the inevitable result of the long-held commitment to personal autonomy. God can be viewed anywhere along a continuum from the biblical deity who intervenes in history to the power-that-makes-for-human-salvation. The *Torah* might be God’s revelation refracted through human culture or it might be simply a collection of ancient wisdom writings. The *halakhah* or religious law issued by rabbis might be regarded as binding or, more often, as general guidance. *Kashrut* or food laws may be observed, or encouraged, or ignored.

Intermarriage with non-Jews might be frowned upon or accepted. A Jew might be defined according to matrilineal descent (that is, of the mother), or it may be acceptable to have one Jewish parent and to have been raised as a Jew.

## Science and Religion

A defining characteristic of the project of Reform was the claim to reconcile Judaism with the best scientific and philosophic knowledge of the day. Its proponents saw themselves as the rightful heirs of the *Haskalah* and embraced the positivist scientific worldview of the Enlightenment. Just as Jews had been doing for hundreds of years, progressive Jews stressed the rationality of Judaism in contrast to the allegedly irrational teachings of Christianity, such as the incarnation or the trinity, and also, as we have seen, they denigrated many of the teachings of Orthodox Judaism. The Pittsburgh Platform (1885) declared

We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of divine Providence and Justice dealing with men in miraculous narratives.

Likewise, the Columbus Platform (1937) affirmed that

Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or deciphered from the records of nature. The new discoveries of science, while replacing the older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion as manifested in the consecration of man’s will, heart and mind to the service of God and of humanity. . . . God reveals Himself not only in the majesty, beauty and orderliness of nature.

At least until after the second world war, the story was very much one of a positive “response to modernity,” as the title of Michael Meyer’s (1988) seminal history of the Reform movement has it. The emphasis upon humanistic rationalism led to the adoption of biblical criticism, with all the implications that this had for a demythologized understanding of the history



and nature of Judaism. And many progressives were at pains to stress their acceptance of the findings of contemporary scientific thought, especially social sciences like sociology and psychology, a preeminent example being Kaplan's *Judaism as Civilization*. But later official pronouncements did not enthuse about science to quite the same degree. The Centenary Perspective (1976) was somewhat ambivalent about "the explosion of new knowledge and of ever more powerful technologies," and the Statement of Principles (1999) did not mention scientific progress at all. Arguably, the impact of science has been somewhat superficial and has never really gone much further than a rejection of crude supernatural beliefs and an integration of philosophical and historical analysis with Jewish theology. It did not result in a particularly strong interest in the natural sciences, for example. Exceptions to this rule included geological estimates of the age of the earth and biological evolutionary theory, which, among US progressive Jews, came to take on an iconic status in the science-religion controversy.

The theory of evolution possessed certain obvious attractions to Jewish reformers, not least as a parallel to the idea that the religious understanding of humankind in general, and of Jews in particular, had evolved over time and would continue to do so. But Darwinism, with its core tenets of competition, cruelty, and chance proved problematic. At first, Reform Jews such as David Einhorn and Isaac Mayer Wise rejected Darwinism because, like so many other religious thinkers in their day, they could not accept the idea of humans as descendants of lower animals. Wise denounced such view as "homo brutalism," and went on:

In a moral point of view the Darwinian hypothesis on the descent of man is the most pernicious that could be possibly advanced, not only because it robs man of his dignity and the consciousness of his pre-eminence, which is the coffin of all virtue, but chiefly because it presents all nature as a battleground, a perpetual warfare of each against all in the combat for existence, and represents the victors as those praiseworthy of existence, and the vanquished ripe for destruction... (*The Cosmic God*, 1876, 51).

But Wise did not reject the idea of evolution per se, only the Darwinian version. And in fact a theistic, teleological conception of evolution, which viewed organic evolution as a natural law and the means by which God achieved His purposes, became commonly accepted among progressives. Emil Hirsch (1851–1923) was probably typical in arguing in *The Doctrine of Evolution and Judaism* (1906) that evolutionary theory was not yet scientifically proven as an adequate account of life for it failed to account for life's origins, had not yet overcome the gaps in the fossil record, and could not explain the shift from the unconscious to conscious. Yet, he suggested, in its assumptions about the order and lawful nature of the universe, and in its recognition of the interdependence of human and non-human forms of life, a non-atheistic version could be easily reconciled with Judaism, which provided the meaning and purpose that were lacking. Kaplan would later go further by stating "We may accept without reservation the Darwinian conception of evolution, so long as we consider the divine impulsion or initiative as the origin of the process." (*Judaism as Civilization*, 1934, 98). In the 1950s and 1960s, there was less interest in attempting to reconcile Judaism with scientific theories, although Gunther Plaut (1912–2012) wrote about a divine goal of greater awareness corresponding with increasing complexity in *Judaism and the Scientific Spirit* (1962). By the 1980s Reform Judaism could be found opposing (Christian) Scientific Creationism, albeit this public activism was motivated primarily by the potential violation of the boundaries between Church and State in general, and science and Judaism in particular. Without espousing the pre-War confidence that evolutionary theory and Judaism could be readily integrated, and without making any comments on the type of evolution envisaged (whether Darwinism or theistic), the Central Conference of American Rabbis had no difficulty taking a stance and asserting that "the principles and concepts of biological evolution are basic to understanding science" (*On Creationism in School Textbooks*, 1984). The case of evolution, then, demonstrates the historically

strong desire among progressives to align with the scientific worldview whenever possible, even while privileging, ultimately, a theological or political perspective.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Bible as Literature](#)
- ▶ [Biblical Studies](#)
- ▶ [Creation in Judaism](#)
- ▶ [Creationism](#)
- ▶ [Evolution](#)
- ▶ [Feminism in Judaism](#)
- ▶ [Judaic Studies](#)
- ▶ [Language and Literature, Hebrew](#)
- ▶ [Messiah](#)
- ▶ [Monotheism](#)
- ▶ [Natural Selection](#)
- ▶ [Philosophy in Judaism](#)
- ▶ [Redemption in Judaism](#)
- ▶ [Revelation in Judaism](#)
- ▶ [Science and Religion](#)
- ▶ [Theology in Judaism](#)

## References

- Cantor, G. N., & Swetlitz, M. (2006). *Jewish tradition and the challenge of Darwinism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hilton, M. (1994). *The Christian effect on Jewish life*. London: S.C.M. Press.
- Hirsch, E. G. (1906). *The doctrine of evolution and Judaism*. New York: Bloch.
- Kaplan, M. (1934). *Judaism as a civilization: Toward a reconstruction of American-Jewish life*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Kaplan, M. (1958). *Judaism without supernaturalism*. New York: Reconstructionist Press.
- Kershen, A. J., & Romain, J. A. (1995). *Tradition and change: A history of reform Judaism in Britain, 1840–1995*. London: Vallentine Mitchell.
- Langton, D. (2002). *Claude Montefiore: His life and thought*. London: Vallentine Mitchell.
- Meyer, M. (1988). *Response to modernity: A history of the reform movement in Judaism, studies in Jewish history*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wise, I. M. (1876). *The cosmic god. A fundamental philosophy in popular lectures*. Cincinnati: Office American Israelite and Deborah.

## Official Statements

- A statement of principles for reform Judaism*. Pittsburgh: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1999.
- Columbus platform: Guiding principles of reform Judaism*. Columbus: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1937.
- Reform Judaism: A centenary perspective*. San Francisco: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1976.
- On creationism in school textbooks*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1984.
- Pittsburgh platform*. Pittsburgh: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1885.

---

## Protestant Education

- ▶ [Religious Education, Protestant](#)

---

## Protestant Epistemology

- ▶ [Epistemology, Reformed](#)

---

## Protestant Reformation

Carl Raschke

Department of Religious Studies, University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA

The general terminology conventionally employed to characterize a complex and far-reaching series of events in Europe during much of the sixteenth century that had significant long-term effects on religion, politics, and even forms of commerce and economic organization. The original “Protestants,” led by the German monk Martin Luther, challenged the absolute authority of the Pope over both spiritual and secular matters and sought a return to the simplicity of the Christian churches of the first centuries. They also focused on the right and obligation of individual Christian believers to read the Bible and to interpret its meaning for themselves as well as to organize congregations without central control from Rome.