Contemporary Jewry
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-023-09524-8

When a *yarmulke* Stands for All Jews: Navigating Shifting Signs from Synagogue to School in Luxembourg

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Received: 14 October 2022 / Accepted: 14 September 2023
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Abstract

In the lives of students in Luxembourg's Liberal Jewish complementary school, flexibility and mobility are highly valued as key characteristics of modern living. Complementary school students feel they easily meet these criteria—they are multilingual, cosmopolitan, and their approach to Jewish life is flexible, and equally importantly, they look, dress, and comport themselves "like everyone else." These factors are understood to facilitate multiple movements and belongings in the contemporary world. The students directly contrast their ways of being with those of more observant Jews whom they refer to as "religious"; the material, embodied, and visible nature of observant Jewish life is perceived to be an impediment to participation and success in the secular sphere. However, when Jewishness appears in these students' secular school classrooms, it is most often represented by Orthodox-presenting men—often a man in a *yarmulke*. Further, these men and their *yarmulkes* are taken to represent all Jews, framed as a homogeneous group of religious adherents. For many complementary school students, these experiences can be jarring—they suddenly find themselves on the "wrong" side of the religious–secular divide and grouped together with those from whom they could not feel more distant. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and a material approach to religion, this article argues that the *yarmulke* comes to point to different levels and modes of observance and identities and enable different possible belongings in the secular public sphere as it travels across contexts that include different definitions of and attitudes toward religion and Jewishness.

Keywords Material religion · *Yarmulke* · *Kippah* · Modernity · Religious difference

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Published online: 29 January 2024

Introduction

During my PhD fieldwork in Luxembourg, as a teacher in a Jewish complementary school and an ethnographer researching the ways children learn about and how to do Jewishness, I was very interested in those moments in which my students were confronted with Jewishness outside of our classroom, in their secular schools and public spaces. How did Jewishness appear to them? What did their experiences tell them about what it means to be Jewish? About their belonging in the secular realm? How often and under what conditions did their Jewishness enter the foreground of their interactions with classmates, friends, or teachers?

One spring day, as I sat at the back of a sixth grade classroom in a local school, observing a unit on world religions, I realized that a dense ethnographic moment was about to unfold in front of me—the teacher, Mr. Andrews, was about to talk about Judaism. He began with a PowerPoint presentation, slide after slide featuring scenes from Israel, images of synagogues around the world, scattered *Magen David*, and Jewish individuals, mostly men, mostly wearing *yarmulkes*, some sporting black hats, and many in what seemed to be public spaces. Mr. Andrews concluded his PowerPoint and invited the students to ask questions.

Throughout the lesson, I kept an eye on one student in particular, a boy named Leo who also attended the Jewish complementary school at which I taught. Leo remained uncharacteristically quiet that day. On subsequent days, as his class completed an assignment for the world religions unit, he fielded some difficult questions about Judaism, his own Jewishness, and most challengingly, about why he and his family did not look like the Jewish people in the teacher's PowerPoint presentation—why was Leo not wearing a *yarmulke* or black hat? It seemed, on the basis of the PowerPoint and other resources Mr. Andrews had given the class, that Jewish men wore *yarmulkes* or some other distinct head covering, so where was Leo's?

This article follows Jewish head coverings, especially the *yarmulke*, as they mediate different possible relationships and ways of being across a range of contexts. Focusing on the experiences of students in a Liberal Jewish complementary school in Luxembourg (hereafter LTT), this article tracks the ways *yarmulkes* appear in the various spaces of students' lives: at home, in the synagogue and complementary school classroom, in their travels and visits with extended families, and in their secular elementary and middle schools. Drawing on approximately 31 months of ethnographic fieldwork and inspired by the material turn in the anthropology of religion (Meyer and Houtman 2012), I argue that the *yarmulke* comes to point to different levels and modes of observance, index different identities, and enable different possible belongings in the secular public sphere as it travels across contexts that include different definitions of and attitudes toward religion and Jewishness.

I begin by discussing what a focus on the material entails and enables. Then, I briefly introduce the *yarmulke* as a head covering and the LTT students as a cohort. I will also explain my role in and relationship to this cohort. The next section will describe how the *yarmulke* operated in the lives of the LTT students and their families. In the final sections, I will outline the surprising new ways the *yarmulke* appeared in a school attended by some of the LTT students. The conclusion will contextualize this series of events in broader debates about the religious and the secular as powerfully normative categories and the role of material media, such as the *yarmulke*, in creating those categories.

The Power of the Material

My discussion is framed by the material approach to religion (Meyer 2008; Morgan 2010). The material worlds of religious groups have long attracted attention from scholars across disciplines. Anthropologists working with the material approach have addressed questions about religious texts (Engelke 2004), pictures (Meyer 2010), ritual objects (Keane 2013), earth (Bloch 2020), gardens (Kalender 2017), food (Jackson 2013), museum exhibits (Bielo 2018), and bodies (Elisha 2018). And, of course, a great deal of attention has been paid to clothing choices, religious garb, and specifically head/hair coverings[1] in public spaces, their meanings, representations, and politics (see Anderson 2016; Franks 2001; Mahmood 2001; Scott 2009).

Jewish materialities are, on the whole, fairly well represented in this turn to the material (see Stolow 2010 on religious texts, Fader et al. 2007 on Jewish museum exhibits and Yares 2022 on their gift shops, Leibman 2020 on domestic objects, Klein 2012 on food, and Ore 2018 on the cooking process and its things, or Shandler and Weintraub 2007 on greeting cards). However, one area remains under-investigated: there is little research studying Jewish clothing choices, religious grab, or head/hair coverings (see Benor 2012, Harel 2019, Milligan 2014b, Taragin-Zeller 2014, Yafeh 2007) and even less that focuses on non-Orthodox Jewish sartorial practices (Emmett 2007, Milligan 2013, and Darwin 2017 are notable exceptions). The little work that does exist in this area tends to focus on individuals' choices about when, where, and why to wear a head/hair covering and how those choices tie into identity formation or expression. In contrast, taking a material approach invites us to center the *yarmulke* itself, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how this head covering is situated within and travels through the broader politics and systems of meanings within which Jewish individuals move every day.

A material approach assumes that materiality is a requirement for the "social circulation and temporal persistence of experiences and ideas" (Keane 2008: 230). At the same time, it acknowledges that the meanings of material forms cannot be fixed; by their very material qualities and often portable nature, the meanings of religious things, what they are understood to do or allow for, and to whom they belong or have import, may change across time, space, and social context. Finally, and perhaps most critically, the material approach to religion argues that religious objects not only have meanings but are “enmeshed in a world of causes and effects” (Keane 2008: 230). As they travel outside of their original contexts, material things can become caught up in new relations, implicated in new projects, and deployed to new purposes and ends. In our present day, when things, religious or otherwise, move farther and faster than ever, mixing and circulating in and out of complex and variable systems of classification, it is particularly critical that we attend to the materiality of religion (Chidester 2008). This approach offers an alternative and perhaps corrective to the tendency in existing literature on Jewish religious garb to “sociologize transactions in things” (Appadurai 2003: 77), overlooking the ways things and humans mutually act on, in relation to, and enliven each other.

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[1] Following Milligan (2013), I acknowledge that there is a distinction between head coverings—customarily associated with men—and hair coverings—typically associated with women. However, while their motivations may be different, in practice they may be indistinguishable, and the terms are often used interchangeably. I will therefore refer to head/hair coverings unless discussing a specific practice or quoting an interlocutor.

Drawing on the material approach to religion, in this article I attend to the shifting media and meaning of the *yarmulke* in the LTT students’ lives. In doing so, I aim to call attention to the polysemous and impactful nature of this head covering. In line with a material approach, I am interested less in authoritative definitions of the *yarmulke* than in tracking the ways *yarmulkes* traveled in the LTT students’ lives, their experiences of and relationships to these objects, and what these “things-in-motion” do in and illuminate about their human and social contexts (Appadurai 1988: 5). Additionally, I hope to highlight the complex and often limiting and challenging ways secularism and secular institutions define religion and religions. Hazard (2019) argues that refocusing our attention on the nonhuman and the ways material objects enter into contingent working relations with other entities—human, ideological, and otherwise—enables something novel to come into view. Building on this idea, I suggest that such a refocusing offers us a novel way to examine categories such as religion and secularism, how they operate and are deployed, and with what consequences. Finally, with this methodological move of zooming in on things to draw attention to social context, I hope to help continue to “de-parochialize” the ethnography of Jewish communities and Jewishness, bringing this area into broader conversations in anthropology’s material turn (Fader 2007).

Background

The *yarmulke* is probably the most recognized sign of Jewishness in the public sphere. My interlocutors often used the Yiddish term *yarmulke* and the Hebrew term *kippah* interchangeably, and in fact, these terms refer to the same object (see Steinmetz 1981). (However, for the sake of simplicity, I will use the term *yarmulke* unless specifically quoting one of my interlocutors).

Traditionally worn by men, the regular wearing of the *yarmulke* is not a mandate, but rather a *minhag* or custom. Over centuries, *yarmulkes* and other head coverings have taken different forms and styles and the appropriate size and correct color have been debated (Silverman 2013), but generally throughout much of Jewish history, men have been required to cover their heads in some fashion, at the very least during prayer (Milligan 2013). Today, the regular, daily wearing of a *yarmulke* or other (or additional) head covering in public spaces is mostly associated with observant, especially Orthodox, men. However, even among these men, the fabrics, sizes, and colors of their *yarmulkes* vary greatly depending on the wearer’s specific affiliations and where they fall along the continuum of observance (Benor 2012). For instance, men on the very observant end of this spectrum might wear black velvet *yarmulkes* while men toward the less observant (but still Orthodox) end might wear a smaller knit *yarmulke* or even a baseball cap. Sephardi and Ashkenazi men might wear different styles or colors, some men might coordinate their *yarmulke* to their outfit, and some might depict a favorite sports team with theirs.

Among non-Orthodox men, however, *yarmulkes* may differ not only in style, but also in when and how they are worn. A non-Orthodox man may elect to wear a *yarmulke* only when in the synagogue or only during prayer, at specific events, such as Pride parades (Milligan 2013), or on a more or less daily basis. Also within the non-Orthodox realm, women may elect to wear *yarmulkes*, either during prayer or as an everyday practice for a variety of reasons, including spiritual motivations or the desire to make an egalitarian statement about women's roles in Judaism (Darwin 2017; Milligan 2014a).

For the students of the LTT, the *yarmulke* was perceived as something that should be worn in the synagogue, at home, or other private, usually ritual and/or family contexts, as it was for most members of their Liberal Luxembourgish synagogue. The *yarmulkes* they wore in those private contexts varied in size and color. Though most male congregants of this synagogue had their own *yarmulkes*, many did not bring them to services and instead elected to wear a *yarmulke* from the basket of spare *yarmulkes* at the synagogue. Notably, even though this synagogue was Liberal, in my experience very few women wore a *yarmulke* during services, and when this did happen, the LTT students often expressed surprise.[2]

'Liberal' here refers to Liberal Judaism, a non-Orthodox movement within the wider progressive Judaism movement that arose in the nineteenth century (though the majority of this congregation was also more or less liberal in the political sense and in the broadest ethical sense (see Schiller 2015)). However, it is important to note that this congregation, based in a synagogue in the south of Luxembourg, was not always Liberal. After struggling for decades to maintain membership or even to make a *minyan*, in 2010 synagogue leadership made the bold decision to transform the congregation from a traditional Luxembourgish Orthodox to a Liberal one. In doing so, they actively sought to attract progressive-leaning locals and Jewish members of the ever-growing expat community. As the new congregation began to grow and more new families with young children joined, the community organized a Jewish education program, which they referred to as Talmud Torah (literally Torah study). Over time, this program cohered from a loosely organized and irregular series of meetings without a curriculum to the more formalized LTT complementary school it was during my fieldwork.

The group of students discussed in this article made up the first cohort to complete their studies and reach *b'nai mitzvah* in the formally organized LTT program.

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[2] While I do not have the space here to delve into these complex gender dynamics, I would like to draw attention to the interesting incongruence in the LTT families' lack of attention to women's garb and surprise at women's religious dress. This is particularly notable given that they often pointed to gender equity and support for women's empowerment as key elements of their own liberalness in contrast with perceived gender inequities among their Orthodox peers.

At the start of my fieldwork, they ranged in ages from 6 to 11 years old. Most were the children of expats who had come to Luxembourg for work. All attended secular schools, whether international or public schools, participated in local sports and other activities, were well traveled and multilingual, and maintained thriving social lives. This was a highly mobile and socially active group of students.

Being an Ethnographer, Becoming a Teacher

Before I turn to the *yarmulkes* at hand, it is critical that I explain my position in the LTT School. I began my research in 2017, intending to undertake participant observation with the Jewish community of Luxembourg. Just a few months into my fieldwork, however, the Rabbi of the Liberal synagogue asked if I would be willing to help teach the youngest class at the LTT; the community was struggling to find volunteers and had limited resources and I had told the Rabbi about my prior experience as an early childhood educator and tutor. I was deeply hesitant at first—I was concerned that becoming a teacher in the very field I sought to study might disrupt the ethnographic process, I was worried that I did not have the appropriate experience, having never taught in a Jewish complementary school before, and that my knowledge of Hebrew was not up to snuff. But the Rabbi was insistent and eventually I agreed.

This role brought with it particular challenges, both methodological and theoretical. Perhaps the greatest challenge lay in the fact that the parents, students, and other teachers of the LTT and I shared similarly mobile backgrounds and progressive outlooks. These overlapping experiences and orientations made reflexivity in my analysis especially crucial and necessitated that I critically attend to my own assumptions about liberalism, the ideal Jewish life, and orthopraxis. Despite these challenges, however, becoming a teacher at the LTT ultimately enabled me to get to know and to work with the students in ways that likely would not have otherwise been possible. Beyond our Talmud Torah lessons, we chatted about their lives, their concerns, their interests, and social worlds, we made crafts and read books and played outside, I was invited into their homes, and was even able to follow some of the students into their school classrooms. And it was there that the elasticity and mobility of the *yarmulke* appeared in new ways for the students—and for me as researcher.

When a *Yarmulke* Holds You Back

Nearly all the families of the LTT school ended up in Luxembourg as part of their highly mobile trajectories. These families strongly valued the ability to move, not only geographically, to new places for work or study or travel, but also across social realms, economic areas, language repertoires, and cultural milieus. Regardless of to what extent they were regularly on the move, the capacity to move and to imagine movement (Salazar 2017) was crucial to families' views of their futures as open planes of possibility over which they are very much in control. LTT parents wanted their children to be able to immerse themselves in new places, learn new languages, to take part in local social life and expat circles, to be able to go anywhere for school and do any kind of job they chose, and to live anywhere they wanted. From "hav[ing] options" and not being limited in future job hunts to the ability to access universities around the world to study in desired programs (both examples highlighted by my student interlocutors and their parents), mobility in practice and orientation was highly valued. Across places and social and cultural spaces and languages, it was central to the ways LTT parents imagined their lives and their children's future lives. LTT students also saw themselves in this framework and anticipated moving for higher education, work, and other reasons, such as "fall[ing] in love" as one student interlocutor romanticized, throughout their future adult lives.

For the LTT families, mobility was also a key way of taking part in the contemporary world; as they saw it, mobility and modernity went hand in hand. Being mostly stationary or "never leav[ing]" one's hometown was rather "old school," a phrase expressed by one LTT father, pointing to an undesired fixity in time and space. Mobility in this framework was an obvious good, allowing one to imagine more different futures for oneself, facilitated by all sorts of movement. And it was to this end that they sought to develop and emphasize their openness, contextual awareness, linguistic adaptability, and general flexibility and mobility.

Even one's Jewishness could and should be mobile in this on-the-go lifestyle. Parents emphasized wanting their children to learn to read Hebrew and to do all the necessary rituals not so that they could become observant in their own everyday lives, but so they could take their Jewishness with them; once they had mastered Hebrew, they could "go anywhere," as LTT parent Adam assured his children, and "sing with random people" in any synagogue, as student Elisa noted. Luxembourg, they were sure, was just a stopover; LTT parents expected that their children would eventually leave, and it was critical that they be able to live a Jewish life (whatever that might look like) and join a Jewish community when they did so, if they so choose. They did not wish for their children to lead entirely untethered lives, but rather wished for them to feel a sense of belonging to Jewish community, both in the abstract sense of the Jewish historical and contemporary world and in the sense of emplaced local Jewish community.

Equally, however, they were emphatic that one's Jewishness should not impede movement, such as the movement between Jewish and secular spheres, Jewish and non-Jewish social spaces, or career and economic opportunities. This is not to say that LTT families envisioned an entirely privatized Jewishness, but rather one that they could ideally choose how and when to reveal and one that was not what they would describe as "religious." In this formulation, there was plenty of room in secular modernity for Jewishness, but not, as I will describe further, for religion and religious modes of Jewishness.

This vision of mobility was intertwined with the high value LTT families placed on individual choice and action. They conceptualized the modern individual as one who is responsible for oneself and is not tied too strongly to a single place or group; this kind of voluntary and even tenuous attachment enabled one to make personal choices and move about freely. One could choose where to live, with whom to make friends, what kind of work to do, and so on. Though some parents worried that their children would not know where they were "from" due to this ongoing movement and glut of choice in their early lives, they felt that the benefits of free choice and mobility greatly outweighed any possible downsides. Overall, LTT parents wanted their children to be "open minded" and inclusive, to make their own choices, to be good students, and eventually to be socially and economically successful adults.

Yet there were certain things, the LTT families posited, that could impede one's mobility and one's full participation in such a life. In particular, the families spoke about the ways excessive observance, which they often described as being "very religious" or even "too religious," could inhibit these aims. For instance, keeping too kosher might limit one's ability to travel, or at least the ability to thoroughly enjoy one's travels, or strictly keeping Shabbat might make it difficult for a child to join the local football team that has games on Saturday mornings, and enter into the associated social world.

Perhaps more than anything else, visible and embodied practices, such as wearing a *yarmulke* in public, were understood to inhibit or even prevent easy movement and participation in the public (secular) world. Wearing a *yarmulke* in daily public life, these families felt, not only made one identifiably Jewish, but identifiably religious.

The LTT families explicitly linked orthodoxy, publicly visible embodied practice, and what they described as "religion" and "the religious." This stood in contrast to how they perceived their own Jewishness and Jewish practice, which was often left ambiguously defined or went unlabeled. Such definitional negotiation and labeling was wrapped up in their commitments to liberal modernity and sense of self as modern, liberal actors. Of course, in other contexts, non-Orthodox Jewish individuals also describe themselves as religious and/or as doing religion (see Ben-Lulu 2019). The LTT families, however, tended to deploy the label of religion and religious in very specific ways as a means of distancing and distinguishing themselves from more observant Jews.

For LTT families, when worn in public, a *yarmulke* acted as a materialization of all sorts of personal qualities about its wearer—the wearer is likely "strict," "backwards," or has "silly ideas" about women's roles and what girls can and cannot do, their life is tightly regulated by religious dicta, and they are therefore prevented from enjoying life as fully as a "more progressive" person might. At the same time, in this frame, this small cloth disc could impede its wearer from moving into new social spaces or successfully negotiating the ostensibly secular public space of Luxembourg or elsewhere. If the public sphere is assumed to be devoid of religion and replete with free thinkers, actors, and citizens (Arkin 2013: 140), a *yarmulke* acts as materialized difference, or worse, a glaring and deliberate material and visual refusal to take part. Among the LTT families, there was little consideration nor appreciation for the multitude of possible reasons or desires underlying public *yarmulke* wearing.

Students and parents often reiterated these ideas through direct comparisons, juxtaposing themselves to more observant relatives or to generic "religious Jews." During LTT meetings, they regularly shared stories and opinions framed by this kind of comparison. For instance, one student, Mor, recounted a story about a recent family vacation: "We went to Rome with my cousins, my mom's, and I got spaghetti carbonara. And they couldn't, you know. We're in Rome, of course I would get spaghetti carbonara! But they don't get to." As Mor explained, these cousins, whose father Mor went on to describe as sometimes wearing a black *yarmulke* and sometimes a “sombrero,” were restricted in their mobility across cultures, their ability to enjoy a relaxing vacation, and the possibility of choosing what they would like to eat because they were *too* religious—they were, Mor felt, missing out, unable to experience Rome or their vacation to the fullest. There was, to Mor’s mind, a clear link between a public *yarmulke* and a life guided by religious imperative, “missing out,” and constrained mobility.

Another student, Aaron, and his mother Ilana similarly described a Chabad Lubavitch family living in Luxembourg. During an exchange after an LTT meeting one Sunday, Aaron informed me that he and his brother, Leo, did not visit the Chabad house much anymore. Aaron noted that his mother felt, and he agreed, that the Chabad children played too rough. Ilana elaborated that the mother of this Chabad family apparently receives little caregiving help from her husband, and thus finds it difficult to manage their multiple young children. (It is worth noting that Ilana was also the primary caregiver in her own family, though she attributed the perceived unruliness of the children in question on the family’s emphasis on traditional gender roles without any apparent self-reflection.) Aaron later added that he occasionally saw the family out walking around; “You can’t miss them,” he explained, because “they’re they only ones in *yarmulkes* and like suits.”[3] Aaron’s story linked the public *yarmulke*, as well as other distinctive clothing, to this family’s religiosity and their implied gender inequity. In his explanation, the *yarmulke* was both a representation and enactment of these issues.

Some students noted the affective impact of the public head covering. For instance, Elisa recounted an incident that occurred during a visit to Belgium. When she and her family passed through an area with many Orthodox residents, Elisa found that moving through this crowd of “everyone in hats and stuff” was “uncomfortable.”

The public *yarmulke* in this discourse was both an index of observance and a material actor in itself. That is, the *yarmulke* both pointed to something about its wearer, but also its very material presence possibly inhibited one’s full immersion in secular public spaces. It stood out and caught the attention of others; one “can’t miss” it. It was certainly not something that the LTT students felt was relevant or desired to wear themselves.

When a *Yarmulke* Represents You

Given this relationship to and understanding of the *yarmulke*, it was understandably surprising to some of the LTT students when they found themselves suddenly linked to and represented by the public *yarmulke* in their school classrooms.

An example is Leo’s aforementioned social sciences unit on world religions. A pedagogical tool popular for the ways it aims to introduce students to religions while making them “less strange” and “minimiz[ing] traditional suspicions and prejudices,” the world religions approach can be problematic for the ways it defines and categorizes different religious lives (Bell 2006: 34). Under this rubric, no one religion is meant to dominate or act as a prototype. Yet the definition of religion itself tends to be, loosely, “anything that looks like modern Christianity,” namely a set of beliefs to which an individual opts to adhere and by which they are motivated to religious action (Boyarin 2019: 11).[4] Additionally, in educational settings, the world religions approach often attempts to make religions commensurable and comparable by breaking each down into a series of elements—categories such as core beliefs, holidays, places of worship, and so on. The aim is to level “morally and epistemologically divergent groups,” but ultimately this process standardizes potentially disparate things, reduces the relevance of context, and leaves little room for nuance (Povinelli 2001: 326). As previously described, this definition of religion did not reflect how Leo and his LTT classmates saw themselves as Jews, nor how they deployed the category of religion in reference to Jewishness. Jewishness for them was not necessarily comparable to other religions, nor were all Jews religious.

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[3] I understood Aaron to be referring to the white shirt and black pants this Rabbi and his sons often wore.

In Leo’s class, students were tasked with creating a presentation that covered five world religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This, Leo told me, was to ensure that everyone learned about all religions, unlike in earlier iterations of the project when “everyone just did their own religion,” resulting in nearly all projects being about Christianity. Also in prior years, as an introduction to this project, Mr. Andrews had invited “different speakers, parents, from within our [school] community” who were affiliated with different religious groups to talk about their religions’ beliefs, symbols, and practices. However, Mr. Andrews felt that these guest speakers did not prove “consistent,” and it was difficult to find parents who were “informative and not persuasive or militant,” and so he no longer invited parents to participate.

Finally, Mr. Andrews had decided it was best that he compile a list of books, videos, and websites the students could use to do research. Providing select resources, Mr. Andrews felt, gave the students a clear place to start and would also help prevent them from stumbling onto “bad” or “dangerous” sites. Drawing on these various sources, the students had to create PowerPoint presentations, each comprised of five slides covering the history, beliefs, holidays, places of worship, and important symbols/objects of the five religions. Each slide needed to have some text and at least one relevant image.

Over the course of the project, Leo, the only Jewish student in his class, was frequently called upon to answer questions or otherwise act as a representative of, authorized speaker for, and knowledge-holder around Judaism.[5] Leo’s classmates asked questions about what things meant, the definitions of certain words, and clarification about particular rituals. They also asked Leo questions about his own experiences with Judaism—“Are you having one?” (a *bar mitzvah*)—and expressed their feelings about certain practices—“I couldn’t do that!” (keep kosher). Some of these questions were easy to answer. Leo identified a picture of *tefillin*, though neither he nor any of the men in his family donned *tefillin*; he was able to explain what Shabbat was about, though his family did not regularly observe Shabbat at home; he told the class that, yes, he would have a *bar mitzvah* the following year.

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[4] The assumptions and issues of the world religions paradigm have been well described elsewhere beyond what I have the space to address here. For more detail, see Bell (2006), Bell (2008), and Masuzawa (2005). For more on the genealogy of the current common conceptualization of religion and its emergence out of post-Reformation Christian Europe, see Asad (1993).

[5] Steven, another student in this class, identified as an atheist, though his family was Jewish. While Leo was aware of this, it seemed that the rest of the class was not.

But some questions proved more difficult and even uncomfortable. In particular, Leo found it difficult to explain why neither he nor his father looked like the images of Jewish men and boys his classmates had encountered at the Orthodox synagogue, in Mr. Andrews’ introduction to Judaism, and in their research materials. At first, in response to the question, “Does your dad look like that?” in reference to an image of young men in black *yarmulkes*, white shirts, and *tzitzit* hanging over their pants, Leo laughed. “Uh no, he definitely doesn’t…that’s a whole ’nother thing.” However, perhaps realizing that his classmates did not know about this other thing, the complex spectrum of observance ranging from progressive, where his own Jewishness was situated, to pious, where those men in black *yarmulkes* were likely located, Leo rephrased his answer: “No my dad doesn’t look like that.” This time, he did not laugh—the humor he had initially found in the question was lost without the appropriate contextualizing knowledge.

Likewise, when asked why he did not wear a *yarmulke* like the boy featured in a YouTube series included in their research materials, Leo found it hard to explain: “I just don’t,” “I mean sometimes, but not always.”

This world religions project was oriented around the material and the visible and aimed at making a visual impact. Mr. Andrews presented many images of religious things, spaces, and actors that caught the students’ attention. Their inclusion in a teacher’s lecture in the school classroom, an authoritative space and mode of presentation, only reinforced the idea that these images and the objects in them were representative of adherents to each religion in question; in other words, the understanding was that this was what Jewish people (that is, men) wore. Further, the range of images available for students to use in their projects was already limited by Mr. Andrews’ selection of sources, which heavily featured Orthodox-presenting people. Even in other similar projects experienced by other LTT students, in which students searched for their own sources, many were directed to sites such as the BBC Religions, which again emphasized Orthodox forms of everyday dress (including an entire subsection on the *yarmulke*).

This imagery tended to maximize difference, strongly featuring individuals who were dressed differently from the assumed neutral norm, and were therefore identifiably different from the apparently neutral ‘us’ in the classroom. Notably, different styles of dress did not appear in the research materials about Christianity, unless worn by identifiable figures, such as priests and other religious leaders; lay Christians were dressed, as one student described, “normal.” Normal clothing was therefore both Christian, as seen in the research materials, and secular, as seen in the secular space of the classroom where everyone wore normal outfits (i.e., jeans, t-shirts, sweaters, dresses, and so on, which appeared neutral or unmarked in that they were not identified by the students as belonging to a particular religious or other affiliation). Further, because many of these lessons and projects created a typological system of religions—there was a singular, monolithic Buddhism, a Judaism, an Islam, a

Hinduism, and so on—these different modes of dress were taken as representative of all adherents of a given religion.

The students clearly picked up on this, but also struggled to reconcile these images with their Jewish classmate sitting in front of them. Enmeshed in shifting relations with different definitions of religion, different sources of authority, specific images of religion and other religions, and particular expectations about neutral attire, the *yarmulke* came to both stand for all Jews figured as religious people and to be a key element of proper Jewish life such that it was confusing that a Jewish classmate did not wear one. If, as the world religions model implied, all religions involved belief-motivated practice and Judaism was a religion and all Jews adherents to that religion, then the absence of a *yarmulke* on a Jewish peer's head could be perceived as a possible failure or at least a perplexing mismatch between the expected and real-life material situation. In other words, the *yarmulke* remained a powerful force even in its absence, which no longer reflected individual choice or an attachment to liberal modernity, but rather undermined the apparent norms of Jewish life and positioned Leo as possibly defying those norms.

Other LTT students grappled with similarly surprising and sometimes challenging encounters in school. As in Leo's experience, the shifting contexts of these encounters shaped how the *yarmulke* appeared, what it did, and the relations in which it became entangled. In 2018, Noah's language and literacy course discussed Judaism in the context of a unit on Anne Frank that culminated in a visit to a traveling museum exhibition about Anne Frank and her family. The teacher, Ms. Rodgers, began with a brief introduction to Judaism, breezing through a quick description of central beliefs, rituals, holidays, important sites, and dress, supporting her lecture with a PowerPoint that included images of Orthodox-presenting men. Satisfied that the students had sufficient contextual information, she shifted focus to the life of Anne Frank. Finally, the class went to visit the Anne Frank exhibition.

Presented first with images of contemporary Jewish people and then with the black-and-white photographs of Anne Frank and the historical moment in which she lived, students had many questions. About the people in both sets of photographs, Noah's classmates asked if he or his family members dressed like that, what he knew about these events, and why Noah himself did not look like the boys in many of the pictures. Some wondered, too, why Jewish people apparently chose to dress in such a distinctive way; why, some classmates debated, did Jewish people not simply "change [clothes]"?

Noah tried to explain that not all Jews dress in the same way and that one could not equate Jewish dress, such as a *yarmulke*, with a Jewish badge. Neither he nor his immediate family wore *yarmulkes* in everyday life and previous generations of his family were, as everyone at the time, simply more "old timey." Despite his efforts, Noah's answers did not seem to resolve his classmates' questions.

Appearing in a different context and in new relationships with other objects and discourses, the *yarmulke* again did something else. Brought into close proximity with historical markers of Jewish distinction, the *yarmulke* became a materialization of difference that could potentially activate risk. This potentiality, combined with Ms. Rodger's presentation, which foregrounded the importance of core beliefs and outward expressions as mere symbols or reflections of those internal states, made it possible to ask why one would not simply remove a particularly marked article of clothing, for instance to avert risk.

Ultimately, Noah was stumped, struggling to pry apart the links being made between Jewishness, the publicly worn *yarmulke*, and other kinds and temporal moments of visible indices of Jewishness, and to connect his own understanding of Jewishness, religiosity, and embodied observance with what was being presented in the classroom.

As described above, for the LTT students, in Jewish spaces and at home, a publicly worn *yarmulke* was an indication of being religious and a mode of embodied Jewishness entirely different from his own. This article of clothing was understood to be a materialization and component of strict observance and therefore of backwardness and closedness, rote practice, a failure to act as an emancipated subject, and a refusal to participate in the liberal modern world. However, in their secular school classrooms, where the *yarmulke* was brought into new relations with new discourses, images, objects, and people, it could do and mean something entirely different. This clash between familiar and novel assemblages and the unexpected plasticity of the *yarmulke* could be confusing or even unsettling for students such as Leo and Noah who encountered the *yarmulke* in school.

It is worth noting that at no point in any of these school encounters did Jewish women's head/hair coverings or dress enter into the conversation. There were few women depicted in the resources provided by teachers and students did not remark on the garb of the women who did appear. Their clothing did not catch the students' attention. Notably, even sources used in some schools, such as the BBC Religions Archive, mentioned women's dress only in passing in the written text; it did not feature women wearing head/hair coverings in any of the main website sections.

In those rare sources which did include women wearing head/hair coverings, without the necessary semiotic framework through which to make sense of a woman's *sheitel* or beret, most of these items did not act as Jewish nor religious markers and did not, apparently, stand out from women's "normal" dress to the students.[6] Perhaps more surprisingly, like their non-Jewish peers in the secular classroom, the LTT students seemed to have little reference for observant Jewish women's head/hair coverings or general dress and rarely brought it up in discussion. Even in narratives in which they recalled encountering observant families, it was the men's dress—their *yarmulkes*, black and white clothing, *tzitzit*—that drew the LTT students' eyes, and which appeared to them as barriers to secular social worlds. The occasional moments in which the LTT students took note of women's head/hair coverings or dress typically revolved around a woman wearing a *yarmulke* or *tallit*, whether in the synagogue or in an image presented during Talmud Torah class. While this issue lies somewhat beyond the focus on this article, the gendered nature of head coverings as powerful material elements in this and similar contexts warrants further research.

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[6] There are some overlaps here with research on the ways in which Jewish head/hair coverings, especially women's coverings, are perceived by non-Jewish audiences. For instance, Rubel (2012) notes that during his 2006 corruption trial, Jack Abramoff wore a black hat to court. While Jewish media consumers worried that his Borsalino would mark him as Jewish and thus extend his criminality to all Jews, the secular media rather linked the fedora to a "crime boss," Godfather-esque appearance and attitude. Similarly, Milligan (2014b) shows that in Pennsylvania, Jewish women's *tichels*, hats, and snoods, circulating within a space populated by highly visible Mennonite and Amish communities, often operate as markers and elements of piety and embodied—but not necessarily Jewish—religiosity. I do not have the space here to tease apart the gendered dynamics of head/hair coverings in this Luxembourgish context, but would at least like to note this issue and its connection to other contexts.

When a *Yarmulke* Fails to Act

LTT student Becca's Hannukah presentation confirms the centrality of context for shaping not only how, but whether the *yarmulke* was able to draw attention or act as a powerful semiotic resource. In 2018, Becca gave a presentation to her class about Hanukkah as part of a show-and-tell series, in which each student is invited to share something special or interesting about themselves, typically with the support of a parent. When it was Becca's turn, she and her mother Leslie approached Becca's teacher, Ms. Fischer, to discuss their plan. Ms. Fischer explained that she welcomed the children bringing their home lives into the classroom. However, it was better, she felt, that they emphasize that these were family traditions, rather than religious practices.

Not feeling that Hanukkah was necessarily religious, but uncertain of how to talk about Hanukkah in the required non-religious way, Becca and her mother decided to focus on the material components of the holiday and their family's celebration of it. On the day of Becca's show and tell, she and Leslie told an abbreviated version of the story of Judah Maccabee and passed around their family *menorah* for everyone to see. Every year, they noted, their family lights this *menorah* for eight nights in remembrance of the Maccabees' brave tale. Becca excitedly explained that this practice included eight nights of presents. Next, Ms. Fischer helped them cue up a series of images of Becca's family celebrating Hanukkah: photographs of people at what appeared to be a small party, images of relatives gathered around a *menorah* in a windowsill, and a brief video of Becca and her sister lighting a *menorah*. In some of these images, there were a couple of visible *yarmulkes*.

With little further commentary about the contents of these photographs and videos, Becca and Leslie handed out small bags of chocolates shaped like Euro coins wrapped in gold foil. As the students unwrapped their chocolate coins, Ms. Fischer invited them to ask questions. There were a few—mostly about the presents, the sweets they had just received, whether Becca ever gets to light the candles by herself. Some students offered comments—one had seen a *menorah* before, others recalled their own experiences with lighting candles or using matches.

Finally, to conclude their presentation, Leslie and Becca invited the students to get into small groups—they were going to learn a new game! Leslie gave each group a small spinning top, which she identified as a *dreidel*, and Ms. Fischer handed out small plastic chips usually used during math lessons. Leslie explained the rules—spin the *dreidel* and see which side lands face up. Landing on "*hey*" means the player should take half of the chips in the pot; "*gimel*" means the player should take all the chips; and so on. Notably, though she named each Hebrew letter on the *dreidel* and its associated action, Leslie referred to the letters as "picture[s]."

After a few minutes of play, it was time for the class to move on to their next subject. The students put away their chips, returned the *dreidels* to Leslie, and ran to stash their remaining chocolate coins in their backpacks in the hallway. After a quick "thank you" to Becca and Leslie, the class was dismissed to head to their next activity.

Over the course of the entire presentation, not once did Leslie, Becca, or Ms. Fischer present these items as Jewish, nor use the word Jewish. As requested, these objects and activities were presented as part of a family tradition. Unlike in other moments, in which *yarmulkes* acted as powerful materializations of Jewishness, in Becca's visualization of a family tradition, *yarmulkes* went unnoticed, unremarkable, undefined and undefining. Situated within an individualizing frame—every family has their own unique traditions—*yarmulkes* did not draw attention, nor act as markers of group identity, nor as indices of religiosity. Removed from any entanglements with discourses, imagery, and relations of Jewishness and emplaced within this limiting frame, the *yarmulkes* worn by some of her male relatives were unable to point to any community or belonging beyond her family unit.

To Becca, it appeared that her classmates simply did not know about *yarmulkes*, did not have the necessary contextual information to identify them; perhaps, Becca posited, her classmates "thought they were just wearing hats." She found this proposition humorous, to think that her classmates perceived these men as sporting hats "for some reason," while she understood the *yarmulke* as a complex force, sometimes a meaningful part of Jewish ritual assemblage, and sometimes an element of excessively public religion. Becca's experience highlights that the potential to act as a semiotic resource or to produce some effect in the world was not only a property of the *yarmulke* in itself, but part of a dynamism of forces that emerged as the *yarmulke* acted and interacted with other objects, discourses, and people in specific contexts (Barad 2003).

Conclusions

These stories are not unique. Several other LTT students experienced encounters such as Leo's and Noah's, as well as Becca's, in their classrooms, whether in the context of a European history lesson, a life and society class, a school holiday party, or playground chat. Many of them reported feeling an initial shock and sense of discomfort or uncertainty. They had spent a great deal of time and effort in the LTT school, synagogue, at home, and in other Jewish spaces distinguishing themselves from religious, less mobile Jewish others as exemplified by observant men who wear *yarmulkes* in public, only to find themselves lumped into a single category with these others, tied together and represented by a public *yarmulke*. Yet ultimately, the LTT students found creative ways to reconcile such new definitions of religion, Jewishness, and themselves as Jews, and the powerful shifting material of the *yarmulke*. They quickly determined what was going on with both the *yarmulke* as a sign and religion as a concept and in relation to Jewishness in the school classroom and figured out ways to navigate and interpret these novel assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Many of the LTT students reframed these events as examples of others' ignorance, and more importantly, as signs of their own awareness of the multiplex contexts and discourses circulating around certain images, things, and ideas and their ability to selectively engage with those even if they did not align with or reflect one's personal sense of Jewishness. In other words, they transformed these negotiations into yet further examples of flexibility, reflexivity, and the ability to move between spaces, whether discursive, religious/secular, spatial, or otherwise. These qualities were in themselves framed as modern and important for mobility. The LTT students posited that observant Jews would likely be unable to manage such encounters: For such observant people, "it's just one way."

The experiences of the LTT students offer three key insights. First, they illustrate that, as religious materials move across contexts, they both shape possible identities and belongings and are themselves shaped by changing criteria, rules, and key concepts, such as religion and religious. These things, in other words, can have powerful consequences in the world even as they are always in the process of changing and becoming (Fontein 2011). This should encourage us to attend not only to the choices individuals make about head/hair coverings or other religious garb or the meanings they and others attribute to it, but the garb itself, its consequences, and the ways it changes across the complex contexts through which it moves.

Second, these events offer a view into some of the assumptions behind and effects of the powerful visualizations of and discourses around religion at work in secular schools, and how these might define the school classroom in ways that place some children on the edge of that secular space. Luxembourg is not unique, and these findings should encourage us to delve deeper, beyond the discursive and policy based, to attend to the material and visual aspects of religion in/exclusion from educational spaces.

Finally, these encounters offer us a new lens on the mobility so desired by the LTT students and their families. For them, ease of movement is strongly linked to, if not synonymous with, the ability to act as an agentive subject. That agentive subject is one who is as liberated as possible from any structuring forces, passions, or attachments. In this way, they make a linear connection between mobility and individually enacted forms of materiality and embodiment, which they negatively associate with religion (Hirschkind 2011). However, as the LTT students' experiences show, agency is perhaps more diffuse; material entities such as the *yarmulke* can also act as driving forces; they absorb attention, cohere novel relations, and exert social influence in unpredictable, rhizomatic ways. In taking seriously the force of things and their generative possibilities, we are encouraged to reconsider how such views of movement condition its possibility on negation and are invited to imagine more generous, affirmative alternatives.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Nora Rubel and Miriam Mora for their encouragement and comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Funding This research was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund under Grant PRIDE15/10921377/CALIDIE/Hu.

Declarations

Competing interests The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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