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Liberal Democracy as a Safeguard for Academic and Religious Freedom

Walter Homolka

ABSTRACT

In his article, the author responds to Jörg Hermann Yiftach Fehige's criticism, expressed in the article "Jewish Theology as a Science in the Context of Post-Shoah Germany" in the fall 2026 issue of "Theology and Science". He explains why theologies, as a subject, are an integral part of the arts and humanities within the Central European university system, and why Jewish theology was added as a university subject as late as 2013, 190 years after this had been demanded by Rabbis Abraham Geiger (1836) and Ludwig Philippson (1837) as a prerequisite for the successful emancipation of Jews in a "Christian State" (Friedrich Schlegel). He also speaks out against allegations reported in Fehige's contribution that he is an abuser, cheater, and plagiarist. Keywords: Paul Feyerabend, Abraham Geiger, German Science and Humanities Council, Jewish emancipation, Jewish identity, Jewish theology, liberal democracy, relationship between state and religions, Reform Judaism, Wissenschaft des Judentums, World Union for Progressive Judaism.

What is to be Achieved

In his paper "Jewish Theology as a Science in the Context of Post-Shoah Germany," published as a preprint in February 2026, Professor Jörg Hermann Yiftach Fehige presents an extensive critique of Jewish theology as a university discipline, referencing selective sources such as Paul Feyerabend's critique of science: "The separation of state and church must be complemented by the separation of state and science, that most recent, most aggressive, and most dogmatic religious institution."¹

The Central European perspective would rather emphasize that academic and religious freedom need the safeguard of liberal democracy. This is why the arts and sciences are taught predominantly through a system of state-funded universities, and the chairholders at those universities enjoy independence as tenured civil servants with privileges comparable to those of judges. At the same time, Germany and other European countries value the fact that theology has invariably been the nucleus of most university foundations. And even universities such as Frankfurt, which were founded by citizens' generosity, did not ignore religion as a subject of academic interest. European education rests on the notion that access should be free for everybody, that educational institutions are a public concern funded by taxpayers, and that the liberal state provides the platform

for academic and religious discourse. This approach is not rooted in a strict division of state, science and religion. The state supports what is beneficial for liberal democracy: free academic discourse and the peaceful interaction of liberal religions in pluralistic societies.

While Fehige situates his argument within Germany's distinctive model of theological faculties, his analysis focuses primarily on the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam rather than on the broader institutionalization of theology at German public universities. This limited scope prompts questions regarding the paper's central aim: Does Fehige's analysis yield substantive insights into the structure of theological faculties in German universities, or does it elucidate the rationale for including theology within the humanities? The degree to which his critique provides an objective evaluation of Germany's model or meaningfully engages with Feyerabend's legacy remains ambiguous.

A significant portion of Fehige's text addresses my involvement in establishing Jewish theology as a university subject in Germany, raising concerns about the author's underlying intent. Although Fehige asserts, "I cite this characterization here solely as part of the documented controversy surrounding him and do not endorse or assess its accuracy," he nevertheless incorporates allegations from third parties—essentially hearsay—even when German courts have already dismissed such sources. The reliance on speculation in academic discourse, particularly when alternative arguments and evidence are overlooked, warrants critical scrutiny. The principle of "audiatur et altera pars" (the other side must also be heard) is especially relevant in this context. While constructive opinion pieces can provide valuable critique, Fehige's approach is marked by ad hominem remarks and selective presentation of facts.

Consequently, I am afraid that the text is more likely to mislead than to contribute meaningfully to academic inquiry. This approach fails to engage with Feyerabend's ideas or address the question of whether Jewish theology qualifies as a science. From an academic perspective, the article's value is therefore limited. In my response, I aim to explain why theologies are integral to the Central European university system and why Jewish theology was rightfully added as a university subject in 2013. I also speak out against allegations reported in Jörg Hermann Yiftach Fehige's contribution that I am an abuser, cheater, and plagiarist.

Germany's Distinctive Model of Theological Faculties

On 1 July 2026, the University of Münster became the first higher education institution in Germany to establish a Faculty of Islamic Theology. The new theological department gives Islamic theology taught by Muslim scholars the same institutional rank as Catholic and Protestant theological faculties, which have been part of German academia for centuries. This move will greatly increase the visibility and importance of discipline. The Faculty of Islamic Theology will be a central institution alongside Protestant and Catholic faculties in the new "Campus of Theology and Religious Studies," which is set to open later in 2026. The guidelines state: "We stand for an Islam that affirms and actively supports the liberal-democratic basic order of the Federal Republic of Germany." ... "We promote a theology that enables reflection, overcomes taboos and allows for open, responsible discussions." ... "We advocate a theology that emphasizes the full equality of women and men." ... "We shape an Islamic theology that thinks and acts from the heart of Europe — in shared responsibility for the future of Europe."²

The first faculty of Islamic theology in Germany was established in 2010 following recommendations from the German Science and Humanities Council (Wissenschaftsrat). The same recommendations provided the creation of the School of Jewish Theology in 2013. What makes these recommendations so essential for the debate? Let us look at the Council's tasks:

The German Science and Humanities Council was established in 1957 as Germany's most significant scientific policy advisory body. It advises federal and state governments on developing the higher education system, both in content and structure, and on state funding for research institutions. Building on its mandate, the Council's recommendations form a foundation for continuous advancement in German science. In January 2010, the Council published comprehensive recommendations on the future of theology and religion-related sciences at German universities.

The Council's detailed study examined whether the existing theological faculties, which collaborate with their respective religious communities, should persist or be transformed into interdisciplinary religious studies programs, a practice often found abroad. This question arose due to declining enrollment at Protestant and Catholic theological faculties, as well as the introduction of Islamic theology alongside established Islamic studies. The Science Council further stressed the importance of building a parallel structure for Jewish theology. For a thorough discussion, in addition to the Council's nearly 300-page recommendations, major works such as Walter Homolka and Hans-Gert Pöttering's *Theologie(n) an der Universität. Akademische Herausforderung im säkularen Umfeld*³ and Gerhard Krieger's *Zur Zukunft der Theologie in Kirche, Universität und Gesellschaft*⁴ are indispensable. Currently, universities in German-speaking countries have around 700 chairs in Catholic and Protestant theology predominantly at state universities, about 40 in Islamic theology and Islamic religious education, and only about 40 in the non-denominational study of religion.⁵

To explain the situation in Germany, here is a brief overview: "Academic theology is predominantly taught at state universities. As such, it operates under the same conditions as all other academic disciplines (including participation in university administration, securing external funding, etc.). In the framework of German university law, this also means that professors of theology are civil servants who are, by and large, employed by the respective Land (state). A professor of theology, just like any other professor, is usually tenured and cannot simply be dismissed. ... This is based on the dominant view that 'religious communities' (Religionsgesellschaften, as they are called in the German constitution, the Grundgesetz or 'Basic Law') form an integral part of the German state and of German society and culture and as such make substantial contributions to their functioning and welfare. For this reason, religious communities in Germany receive public funding in various ways. In comparison to other countries, which are marked by a strict separation of state and Church and in which research and teaching of academic theology is confined to ecclesial or private institutions, theology in Germany is, no doubt, in a privileged position."⁶

The Founding of the University of Frankfurt

At this point, I would like to digress briefly. When Fehige cites the founding of the University of Frankfurt in 1914 as a prime example of theology's abandonment as an

academic discipline, he oversimplifies the matter and overlooks key developments. He asserts: “In that sense, the lack of a theology faculty was a gesture of emancipation and equality: theology was seen as a site of exclusion, and its omission ensured academic freedom and neutrality in matters of religion.” He conceals the fact that in 1912 the social-liberal theologian Martin Rade (1857–1940) campaigned in vain for the establishment of a department of Jewish theology in the soon-to-be-founded University of Frankfurt am Main, deeming it to be “the worthiest, healthiest and most useful form of recognition of the large financial contribution of Frankfurt Jews to the founding of the university.”⁷

In 1914, the scientism of the time might have intertwined with the desire to be independent of the religious communities’ right to appoint faculty. A closer look at the university’s history reveals that, even without a theological faculty, theologians have always conducted research and taught at the University of Frankfurt. In addition, other scholars addressed religious issues; for example, Martin Buber served from 1923 to 1933 as a lecturer and honorary professor of “Jewish Religious Studies and Jewish Ethics.” The first Protestant professor of theology at the University of Frankfurt, Erich Foerster (1865–1945), had earned his habilitation in church history at the Frankfurt Academy of Social and Commercial Sciences, which was integrated into the university in 1914, and became a full honorary professor in 1915 (from 1930 in “Religious Studies”). Between 1929 and 1933, Paul Tillich taught theology seminars in addition to his philosophical and pedagogical instruction (see Dienst 2008).⁸ In 1987, the Department of Religious Studies was split into two separate departments, Protestant Theology and Catholic Theology. Karl Dienst concludes “that, despite all their differences, the overarching commonality of ‘Frankfurt Theology’ can be formulated as follows: taking the contemporary relevance of theology seriously beyond the confessionalization and privatization of the Christian religion.”⁹

Is There Jewish Theology as an Academic Subject?

Starting in the 1820s, prospective rabbis could study “Mosaic Theology” at universities such as Giessen, Marburg, and Tübingen.¹⁰ However, this was done under the supervision of Christian professors and within a Christian framework. This concept of a Jewish theology was introduced as early as the 1830s. Rabbi Dr Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) established the *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie* (“Scientific Journal for Jewish Theology”) in 1835. In 1836, he advocated for the establishment of a Jewish theological faculty at a state university as a marker of Jewish emancipation, describing this as an “urgent need of our time.”¹¹ The Jewish Theological Seminary was founded in Breslau in 1854, followed by theological institutions in Budapest (1877), New York (1886) and Vienna (1893), with the Budapest one still existing today under the English name “Jewish Theological Seminary—University of Jewish Studies.” The Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Paris, Lazare Eliezer Wogue—a professor of theology at the Séminaire Israélite de Paris—laid out the foundations of a “Cours de Théologie juive” in a 110-page work as early as 1887.¹²

Fehige further neglects to mention the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University in New York City, a leading modern-orthodox rabbinical college in the United States. He misleadingly portrays “Jewish theology” as an unauthentic and

recent phenomenon. I have to fundamentally challenge Fehige's assertions and reaffirm that "Jewish theology" has been a meaningful and established term across all Jewish denominations since the nineteenth century.

In 1906, Kaufmann Kohler and Jacob Zallal Lauterbach¹³ explained in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*: "Jewish theology, therefore, denotes the doctrinal representation of the contents and essence of Jewish religion, the principles on which it rests, and the fundamental truths it endeavors to express and to realize." In contrast to Fehige, I would hold that Jewish theology has long been a term used to identify Jews' search for authenticity and self-definition within a wider societal context. For Fehige, it is possible to ignore a vast number of publications that he could have discussed in his paper. Here are some striking examples:

- *A New Jewish Theology in the Making* by Eugene Borowitz. Westminster Press, 1968.
- *Jewish Theology* by Rabbi Louis Jacobs, Behrman House, 1971
- *Jewish Theology in Our Time. A New Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Belief*, edited by Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010.
- *Teologia ebraica. Una mappatura* by Massimo Giuliani. Editrice Morcelliana, 2014
- "Probleme der Jüdischen Theologie—Dogmatik? Systematik? Wissenschaft?" by Daniel Krochmalnik. In: Stefan Nacke, Marcus Optendrenk and Thomas Söding (eds.), *Die Gottesfrage in der Universität. Debatten über Religion und Wissenschaft*, Verlag Herder, 2021, p. 119–140.
- *Modern Jewish Theology: The First One Hundred Years, 1835–1935* by Samuel J. Kessler and George Y. Kohler (eds.), Jewish Publication Society, 2023.

Fehige quotes the work of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993), who "offers an image of Judaism that is irreconcilable with the idea of a systematic 'Jewish theology.'" When he invokes Jewish orthodoxy to question the existence of Jewish theology, this may be compared to a Catholic assessment of Luther's reformation. Not only does Jewish orthodoxy reject the historical-critical method, but it is also a distinct denomination in its own right. A reference to the orthodox interpretation of Halakhah is hardly convincing, especially since Fehige should have considered the progressive position. From this position, the Abraham Geiger College was established as an institution to train Reform Jewish clergy. One of its prominent representatives was Rabbi Prof. Dr Walter Jacob (1930–2024), a president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the founder and president of the Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam. "Jewish Theology & Thought" is also taught at Geiger's progressive sister institution, Leo Baeck College in London (founded in 1956 as the Jewish Theological College), and at the same time at its orthodox equivalent, the London School of Jewish Studies. The subject is offered at various universities in North America, including Emory University, the University of Virginia, and Notre Dame University in Indiana, which is inspired by its Catholic character.

Jewish Theology: Qualifying the Leaders of a re-emerging Jewish Community

Since 1989, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Jewish community in Germany has grown from 29,000–250,000, largely due to immigration from the former Soviet Union.¹⁴ This significant demographic change brought opportunities to diversify Jewish life and

create new perspectives for the future but inevitably led to controversy.¹⁵ The recommendations of the Science Council were taken up by progressive Jewish leaders, notably in the creation of the Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam, founded in 1999.

Fehige embraces Hannah Tzuberi's (a convert born as Christiane Steuer) idea of a politically induced "re-forestation" of German Jewry: as if the re-emergence of an independent, progressive Jewish national community body in Germany were due to the German government's obsession with presenting the world with a facade of willing, well-integrated, albeit unauthentic Jews. I ask myself: is this a likely or rather a far-fetched assumption?

Using this assumption as a key to understand the formation of Jewish theology as a university subject in Germany fails to realize that the Abraham Geiger College was predominantly established by a group of Jewish leaders who had to flee Germany during the Hitler regime, made a career abroad and wanted to give back something to their former homeland once the Wall had come down. The Jewish community raised its population to some 212,000 newcomers from the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

These were senior rabbis, lay leaders, and scholars, such as Rabbi W. Gunter Plaut (Toronto), Rabbi Alexander Schindler (New York), Rabbi Herman Ezra Schaalman (Chicago) and Rabbi Walter Jacob (Pittsburgh), whose families had fled Nazi Germany to North America and who now wanted to build on the rich liberal Jewish heritage and ensure that Liberal Judaism had a future in Germany again. In fact, in its early years, Abraham Geiger College was funded predominantly by generous private donations from these German-Jewish immigrants in North America, rather than by the German taxpayer.

From Jews for Jews: Jewish Identity in the Making

Abraham Geiger College advanced Jewish theological education in its first fifteen years, leading to the creation of a university-level theological institute: Jewish teachers upholding Jewish Identity within Judaism as a living faith. The governors of the States of Bavaria and Thuringia showed an interest in accommodating such an institute of Jewish Theology. After initial talks, the governor of Thuringia made a firm offer publicly.¹⁶ By then, Brandenburg had also offered to establish a university institute, thereby strengthening the existing ties with the Abraham Geiger College, which had existed since 2001. On March 20, 2013, the Brandenburg state parliament passed an amendment to the Higher Education Act, thereby paving the way for the establishment of the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam.¹⁷

After approximately three years of negotiations among federal and state authorities and university leadership, the first Jewish theological institution was established, analogous to existing Protestant, Catholic, and Islamic theological departments at state universities. Under German university law, religious communities are granted clear participatory rights, reflecting the constitutional framework for religious freedom. In § 8 of the Brandenburgisches Hochschulgesetz (Brandenburg Higher Education Act), "Theologische Ausbildung an staatlichen Hochschulen," it becomes evident how theology exists and functions at German public universities. It is an interesting and worthwhile concept for distinguishing cultural studies (for example, Jewish studies) and religious studies from theologies.¹⁸ Theologies need the denominational ties to, and supervision by, the relevant faith group to function as an authentic expression of that identity. This is the basis for their role in training the clergy for this particular religious expression.

On November 25, 2014, the president of the Verband der deutschen Judaisten (Association of German Judaic Studies Scholars), Prof. Dr Giuseppe Veltri (University of Hamburg), delivered the commemorative lecture marking the 15th anniversary of the Abraham Geiger College on the topic “Daughter of Time: On the History of Jewish Theology.”¹⁹ To reflect the growing diversity within the field of Jewish studies, the professional association changed its name in 2022 to Fachverband Judaistik / Jüdische Studien / Jüdische Theologie in Deutschland. At the association’s conference on October 30 and 31, 2022, Rabbi Prof. Dr Elisa Klapheck (currently chair of the General Rabbinical Conference of Germany) delivered a lecture titled “Jewish Theology(ies) Exists Only in the Plural,” hence recognizing the subject.²⁰

Flaws in Fehige’s Argument—Some Examples

Fehige refrains from seeking evidence for his assertions. He could have analyzed the academic regulations, the annotated course catalogue, and other publicly available materials. For example, if he states that the school “drew students from abroad despite German being the language of instruction,” then that is not correct. In fact, English is predominantly used, accommodating both international students and faculty. Professors such as Admiel Kosman, Idan Dershowitz, and Jonathan Schorsch do not have sufficient proficiency in German to teach in German. Instead of reporting on the curriculum of the School of Jewish Theology and its individual modules, as well as on the chairs and their core aspects and characteristics, he cites almost exclusively from a law firm’s report. On January 15, 2026, the Oberlandesgericht Frankfurt am Main (the Frankfurt Higher Regional Court) dismissed this very report by the law firm Gerke Wollschläger—which had been commissioned by the Central Council of Jews in Germany without a formal mandate—as a party-appointed expert opinion. It is therefore hardly an objective source. More on this below.

One of Fehige’s few substantive comments in this context is: “Particularly striking is the adoption of divisions such as that between ‘systematic’ and ‘practical’ theology—a distinction that has become increasingly untenable even within traditional frameworks like Roman Catholic theology”. He does not address the fact that these divisions go back to the protestant reformer Friedrich David Ernst Schleiermacher in the context of the creation of the new university ideal defined by Wilhelm von Humboldt and have found a parallel Jewish expression by Rabbi Abraham Geiger, otherwise not a friend of Schleiermacher’s ideas, when he formed the newly founded Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin in 1872.²¹ These divisions were relevant then and are relevant now. They were used when Islamic theology departments were recently established. And they also make sense in the Jewish context.

Religious Jewish Diversity in Germany, Past and Present

Regarding historical developments and differences in religious and Jewish diversity in North America and Germany, a correction is in order. Contrary to what Fehige claims, there was no “tripartite division of religious currents” in pre-Shoah Germany. In the largest Jewish community, the Jewish Community of Berlin, the only distinction made was between “Alter Ritus” and “Neuer Ritus,” the Old Rite and the New Rite, i.e.

between orthodox and liberal. At that time, “conservative” was synonymous with “orthodox.”²² Today’s Conservative Judaism (Masorti) emerged only in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s.²³ Masorti Olami, the Conservative World Federation, has one member congregation in Germany (as of May 2026): the synagogue on Oranienburger Straße, one of the eight synagogues under the umbrella of the Jewish Community of Berlin. The Masorti Association for the Promotion of Jewish Education and Jewish Life, was founded in Berlin in 2002, operates two kindergartens and an elementary school, and is not a religious community.²⁴

The “Homolka Affair” in Light of the Court Rulings

Fehige’s argument is one of authenticity. First, he dismisses the right of theologies to operate within the university context. Then he claims that there has never been an authentic subject such as Jewish theology. Finally, he dismisses the creation of Jewish theology in Germany as a political hoax of the German authorities to provide the world a choreography of submissive, tame Jews to show how healthy the Jewish community in Germany has become after World War II. This culminates in the discreditation of one of those who have assisted the realization of Jewish theology as part of the pluralization of theologies in Germany (Austria and Switzerland). I am somewhat aghast about what kind of allegations Fehige spreads in his paper. What Fehige describes as “unresolved” matters have, in fact, long since been settled. While German courts and authorities have dismissed and forbidden the repetition of most of these allegations, Fehige serves as a willing distributor outside of the constraints of the German jurisdiction.

The subject of the proceedings was publications by university professor Prof. Dr Jonathan Schorsch, who in 2022 had launched a year-long campaign against me without any reliable factual basis. This campaign subsequently received considerable media coverage and was taken up by other parties. The aim of the legal dispute was to prevent the continued dissemination of defamatory content.²⁵

Frankfurt Court: Defamatory Allegations Inadmissible

The Higher Regional Court of Frankfurt am Main confirmed the first-instance decision and, on January 15, 2026, clarified that the contested statements are inadmissible. The opposing party was unable to justify its defamatory allegations in the appeal proceedings either. This means that the ban on further dissemination of these statements remains in place. Suspicions expressed about me were inadmissible. The Frankfurt Higher Regional Court clearly identified the legal violations committed by the opposing professor. Among other things, the Senate stated: “The aforementioned statement, in which the defendant described the behaviour of the plaintiff and those who made his career possible as ‘depressing and disturbing,’ ‘tasteless,’ ‘ugly,’ ‘banal,’ ‘bizarre,’ ‘surreal,’ and ‘disgusting,’ will be understood by the average recipient, taking into account the overall context, due to the contested phrase ‘possible crimes committed by someone who claims to be a rabbi,’ which contains factual elements, as at the same time, there is reason to suspect that the plaintiff may have committed criminal offences over many years and that he may not be a rabbi or may only be pretending to be one.” And further: “The fact that in the present case only an abstract accusation of possible criminal offences committed over many

years is made, without giving further details, does not preclude the assumption of the suspicion. This alone significantly damages the plaintiff's reputation, and there is a risk that 'something will stick,' even if the suspicion is not substantiated."

Schorsch Initiated a Smear Campaign Using Unfounded Allegations

The Higher Regional Court also correctly found that Prof. Dr Jonathan Schorsch deliberately used his widely read blog to influence public opinion. He had played a key role in initiating the public debate about me, among other things, through a letter of more than 20 pages, which he sent within the university, containing unfounded allegations that were not substantiated by any evidence, as well as through his mention in numerous press reports from 2022 and 2023.

In both courts' opinions, the defendant was aware that he was the focus of media attention. Nevertheless, he returned to this topic on his blog in May 2023, knowing full well that it would give him considerable reach. The statements in dispute were therefore correctly classified as inadmissible, prejudicial reporting of suspicion, which massively violated my personal rights. The defendant, Professor Dr Schorsch, has been sentenced to bear the full costs of the appeal proceedings, amounting to several thousand euros. If he violates the injunction, he faces substantial administrative fines.

King's College London Rejects Allegations of Research Misconduct

On 10 December 2025, the President of the University of Potsdam, Prof. Oliver Günther, PhD, announced to the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Philosophy the results of the review by King's College London of the allegations made in 2022 by Prof. Dr Jonathan Schorsch against Prof. Dr Walter Homolka. All allegations of research misconduct were rejected.

The doctoral degree remains valid; some small changes to the dissertation had already been made.²⁶ This also finally clears up the allegations of plagiarism. The results of the review show that these allegations against me were also without substance.

Significance of the Latest Decisions

The legal victories before the Higher Regional Court of Frankfurt am Main—most recently with the ruling of 15 January 2026 (Ref. 16 U 116/24)—mark the positive conclusion of years of legal disputes concerning freedom of expression, which had to be conducted on my behalf.

In numerous proceedings, we were able to successfully take action against inadmissible reports based on suspicion—not only against numerous media outlets such as Axel Springer SE and Deutschlandradio, but also against the Central Council of Jews in Germany, which attempted to defame me with a one-sided, interest-driven expert opinion prior to the board elections of the Union of Progressive Jews. The Central Council of Jews in Germany eagerly embraced Prof. Dr Schorsch's allegations: they saw their chance to weaken, thereby, the progressive movement in Germany as an unwelcome competitor to state funding. A press release by the Central Council, dated 7

December 2022, was an attempt to gain control of the Abraham Geiger College of the Union of Progressive Jews.

Prohibition of Contested Statements of the Central Council of Jews in Germany

Although the Press Chamber of the Berlin Regional Court ruled on 21 February 2023 that there was insufficient evidence, public funding bodies took these expressions of suspicion as an opportunity to withdraw their funding from Abraham Geiger College. The subject of the proceedings was publications by Prof. Dr Jonathan Schorsch. The Court of Appeal upheld the preliminary injunction against the dissemination of these allegations on 7 October 2024. In its ruling of 8 July 2025, the Press Chamber of the Berlin Regional Court prohibited all of the contested statements of the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the accompanying press release of 7 December 2022, as well as an article in the *Jüdische Allgemeine* newspaper of the same date, in the legal proceedings. The costs of the proceedings were imposed in full on the Central Council of Jews.

“Legal Dispute Between Axel Springer and Rabbi Homolka Settled”

These decisions contributed significantly to my rehabilitation. The same applies to the settlement reached with Axel Springer SE in June 2024, which states that Springer Publishers and I agreed that comprehensive investigations “did not reveal any criminal or disciplinary offences.”²⁷ Investigations conducted by the University of Potsdam and the criminal law firm Gercke Wollschläger on behalf of the Central Council of Jews in Germany were unable to confirm any allegations whatsoever. My legal counsel summed it up: “All that remains are vague allegations of abuse of power through the accumulation of offices, which are neither concrete nor reliable and do not prove any active misconduct on the part of our client. Ultimately, no substantial charges could be brought against Rabbi Walter Homolka.”²⁸

We have seen that the accusations made by Professor Dr Jonathan Schorsch were unsubstantiated, just like the speculative reporting by Alan Posener, a freelance contributor to the daily newspaper *Die WELT*. Posener was fined €15,000 by the Berlin Regional Court on July 11, 2023, for violating my personal rights, citing the “particular severity of the personal injury.” The 2023 report by the law firm Gercke Wollschläger, commissioned by the Central Council of Jews in Germany, was declared unsubstantiated and banned by the Berlin Regional Court on July 8, 2025, and may no longer be disseminated.

How come that Fehige continues to quote extensively from this report without mentioning that a final court verdict has declared it unsubstantiated?

“Neither a Rabbi nor a Jew:” a Campaign of Vilification

Particularly questionable is the way in which Fehige revisits a media debate from 1998, in which the Orthodox-leaning Central Council of Jews in Germany claimed that I was neither Jewish nor a rabbi. The primary platform for these accusations and defamations was the *Allgemeine Jüdische Wochenzeitung*, published by the Central Council—and thus not a neutral, independent, or balanced media outlet. A glance at the newspaper suggests

that I was the target, but the issue was about preventing the growth of pluralism and potential competition, as headlines such as “Progressives Judentum versus Einheitsgemeinde” (“Progressive Judaism versus the United Community”) (May 14, 1998) make clear.

Almost thirty years later, Fehige revisits these serious false claims, which are contained in the so-called “Fürst package,” and disseminates them. With some scrutiny, he could have found the original dispute about my ordination as a rabbi from 1997/98 at an earlier attempt to discredit my work as an engaged Jew trying to assist a vivid Jewish community life. This first round of slander is found in a range of letters to the editor, which were published in the *Jüdische Allgemeine Wochenzeitung* in Germany and are accessible to this day. Among the letters to the editor published on January 22, 1998, are those by Rabbi Albert H. Friedlander (Dean, Leo Baeck College, London, and Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg, Berlin) and Rabbi Rodney Mariner (President of the European Rabbinical Court, London) about my alleged “Christianizing tendencies” and rumors about my ordination.

The Dean of Leo Baeck College wrote: “Mein Freund Micha Brumlik erwähnt in seinem Gespräch mit der ‘Allgemeinen’ mein Vorwort zu Rabbiner Dr. Homolkas ‘Jewish Identity in Modern Times: Leo Baeck and German Protestantism,’ falsch zitiert von Micha als ‘german practicisim.’ Vielleicht hat er deshalb nicht begriffen, daß Dr. Homolka gerade diese Konfrontation zwischen Judentum und Christentum durch Zitate der Lutheraner zeigen mußte. Diese Arbeit, in Englisch und auf Deutsch jetzt schon in zwei Ausgaben, war eine Dissertation an einer der angesehensten Universitäten Großbritanniens, dem King’s College London. Mein Vorwort entstand nicht aus einer ‘gewissen Hast.’ Als Mitglied der Prüfungskommission zusammen mit anerkannten Wissenschaftlern in diesem Gebiet fanden wir diese Arbeit eine würdige Leistung. Der Angriff auf das liberale Judentum in Deutschland, zu dem sich Micha Brumlik ja auch in diesem Interview bekennt, ist bedauerlich. Die Gründung der ‘Union progressiver Juden in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz’ ist ein besonders positives Zeichen eines neuen jüdischen Lebens, in dem sich Micha Brumlik sowie auch Walter Homolka viele Verdienste erworben haben” (“In his interview with the *Allgemeine*, my friend Micha Brumlik mentions my foreword to Rabbi Dr. Homolka’s *Jewish Identity in Modern Times: Leo Baeck and German Protestantism*, which Micha incorrectly quotes as ‘German practicalism.’ Perhaps that is why he failed to grasp that Dr. Homolka had to demonstrate precisely this confrontation between Judaism and Christianity through quotations from the Lutherans. This work, now available in two editions in English and German, was a dissertation at one of Britain’s most prestigious universities, King’s College London. My foreword was not written in a ‘certain haste.’ As a member of the examination committee alongside recognized scholars in this field, we found this work to be a worthy achievement. The attack on Liberal Judaism in Germany, to which Micha Brumlik also commits himself in this interview, is regrettable. The founding of the ‘Union of Progressive Jews in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland’ is a particularly positive sign of a new Jewish life, in which both Micha Brumlik and Walter Homolka have rendered great service”).

Rabbi Mariner’s letter to the editor ends with the words: “Wir schätzen Rabbiner Walter Homolka als besonnenen Kollegen im Rabbineramt und wünschen ihm weiterhin viel Kraft für seine segensreiche Tätigkeit in Deutschland” (“We hold Rabbi Walter

Homolka in high regard as a level-headed colleague in the rabbinate and wish him continued strength for his blessed work in Germany”).²⁹

In the same issue of *Jüdische Allgemeine Wochenzeitung*, Dr. Esther Seidel, lecturer in Jewish philosophy at Leo Baeck College in London, shares her thoughts: “... Davon abgesehen kann das Zitat (in Homolkas Buch auf S. 79), das Brumlik als Stein des Anstoßes benutzt, wodurch dem Autor als dessen eigene Position eine” lutherische Perspektive “unterstellt wird, nur durch eine böswillige Interpretation auf diese Art gedeutet werden, die dabei den Gesamtzusammenhang außer acht läßt. ... Ausschlaggebend und vor allem verdienstvoll ist doch, daß Homolkas Buch die Position Leo Baecks und seine Kritik am Christentum in korrekter Weise zur Darstellung bringt. ... Darüber hinaus sind Brumliks Zweifel hinsichtlich der Eignung von Rabbiner Dr. Walter Homolka und seine Angriffe auf ihn bedauerlich und deshalb zurückzuweisen, weil sie persönlicher Art zu sein scheinen und völlig außer acht lassen, daß Homolkas Ordination von namhaften Rabbinern, deren wissenschaftlicher Rang zugleich nicht zu bezweifeln ist, durchgeführt und unterstützt wurde. Deren Beurteilung und Entscheidung sollte mehr Gewicht und Autorität tragen als die unfundierte Verurteilung eines Außenstehenden” (“... That said, the quotation (on p. 79 of Homolka’s book) that Brumlik uses as a bone of contention—thereby attributing a ‘Lutheran perspective’ to the author as his own position—can only be interpreted in this way through a malicious reading that disregards the overall context. ... What is decisive and, above all, commendable is that Homolka’s book accurately presents Leo Baeck’s position and his critique of Christianity. ... Furthermore, Brumlik’s doubts regarding the suitability of Rabbi Dr. Walter Homolka and his attacks on him are regrettable and must therefore be rejected, because they appear to be of a personal nature and completely disregard the fact that Homolka’s ordination was performed and supported by renowned rabbis whose scholarly standing is beyond question. Their assessment and decision should carry more weight and authority than the unfounded condemnation of an outsider.”

On the same page, Michael Lawton, 1st Chairman of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Cologne), summarizes Micha Brumlik’s resignation and states: “... Aber am Ende der Diskussion war es anscheinend Herrn Brumlik nicht möglich, sich der Meinung der absoluten Mehrheit zu fügen, die Herrn Rabbiner Walter Homolka das Vertrauen aussprach und die Vorwürfe gegen ihn zurückwies. Letztlich sah sich Herr Brumlik nicht in der Lage, sein Vorstandsmandat aufrechtzuerhalten, da er , kein Vertrauen in die internationalen Institutionen des progressiven Judentums habe, daß diese die Werte des Judentums bewahren können. ‘Diese Aussage führte zu dem möglichen Schluß: wer solches Vertrauen nicht besitzt, kann das progressive Judentum nicht vertreten’ (‘... But at the end of the discussion, it appears that Mr. Brumlik was unable to accept the opinion of the overwhelming majority, which expressed its confidence in Rabbi Walter Homolka and rejected the allegations against him. Ultimately, Mr. Brumlik found himself unable to maintain his position on the board, as he ‘had no confidence in the international institutions of progressive Judaism to preserve the values of Judaism.’ This statement led to the possible conclusion: anyone who lacks such confidence cannot represent progressive Judaism”).

These authentic voices paint a very different picture of Micha Brumlik than the one Fehige presents today. To challenge Brumlik’s self-presentation, let us quote once again from Lawton’s letter to the editor: “...” Leider vermissen wir in seiner Darstellung

der Diskussion der Delegierten eine ihm sonst übliche kritische-akkurate Situationsanalyse. “Nachträglich versucht er Motive für die Position der Mehrheit auszudenken, die keine der Anwesenden wiedererkennen werden” (“Unfortunately, his account of the delegates’ discussion lacks the critical and accurate analysis of the situation that is otherwise characteristic of him. In hindsight, he attempts to speculate on the motives behind the majority’s position—motives that none of those present would recognize”).

On June 17, 1998, Rabbi Danny Rich (Chairperson, Rabbinic Conference, Union of Liberal & Progressive Synagogues) and Rabbi Danny Smith (Chairperson, Assembly of Rabbis, Reform Synagogues of Great Britain) wrote: “Dear Mrs Hart, As the Chairpersons of the two rabbinic bodies that make up the Council of Reform and Liberal Rabbis of Great Britain and Ireland, we are disturbed by the constant barrage of attacks directed against Liberal Judaism in Germany and most particularly against Rabbi Dr Walter Homolka. Rabbi Dr Walter Homolka, who was given s’michah by three of our most distinguished international colleagues, has worked hard in an attempt to bring vibrant Liberal Judaism to the Jews of Germany. On behalf of our colleagues we celebrate the revival of Liberal Judaism in Germany, and we look forward to an even closer working relationship with the Liberal movement (its rabbis, its lay persons and its communities) as it goes from strength to strength. Yours faithfully, ...” An abridged version of this letter appeared in German under the headline “Pro Homolka.”³⁰

Rabbi Dr Charles H. Middleburgh (Executive Director, Union of Liberal & Progressive Synagogues) wrote on June 18, 1998: “Dear Mrs Hart, On behalf of the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, the third largest body in the Anglo-Jewish community, I am writing to endorse the comments of my colleagues Rabbis Danny Rich and Danny Smith. We salute the sterling work to rebuild Liberal Judaism in Germany, the land of its birth, and applaud the dedication of the lay people and rabbis, among them Rabbi Dr Walter Homolka, who have done and are doing so much in pursuit of this important task. Your discerning readers may well wonder whether the constant and deplorable campaign of vilification that has been mounted against Rabbi Homolka might possibly have everything to do with the steady growth and influence of German Liberal Judaism towards which he has contributed such effort and commitment. Yours truly ...”

On July 12, 2001, Rabbi John D. Rayner CBE, Honorary Life President of the Union of Liberal & Progressive Synagogues, shared with some twenty colleagues in the rabbinate his deliberations and concluded his letter: “It would appear that recently an attempt was made to disqualify or dissuade Rabbi Dr Walter Homolka from signing conversion certificates. In my view that attempt is to be deplored and repudiated, for the following reasons: It is absurd as well as offensive to suggest that Rabbi Dr. Walter Homolka—given his intelligence, knowledge, ability, experience and achievements—is not qualified, or less qualified than others, to judge whether a candidate is sincerely motivated and adequately equipped to lead a Jewish life. The fact that he received his Semichah privately rather than from a rabbinic seminary is no reason for disqualifying him; see above. The fact that he received it from three distinguished rabbis, including Rabbi Dr Walter Jacob, makes the attempt to do so an insult to them, as well as to him. The fact that the ULPS Rabbinic Conference has seen fit to admit him to membership, makes it an insult, additionally, to it.”

Apparently, Fehige simply dusts off an old narrative that Rabbi John Rayner described in his 2001 letter as a “campaign of vilification” that is “emanating from elements of the

German Jewish population and press hostile to Progressive Judaism.” It is apparent that what Fehige claims to be revealing as major news was already the subject of extensive debate some thirty years ago.

My Jewish Journey: Facts³¹

My father was Catholic; my mother was Protestant. Neither of them practiced their faith. I left the Catholic Church when I reached the age of religious maturity, at fourteen. At the age of seventeen, I converted to Judaism and was a member of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Straubing until I graduated from high school, and a member of the Israelitische Kultusgemeinde München und Oberbayern during my college studies. Both Jewish communities are orthodox. I was fascinated by the Jewish teaching of “a hidden God”; I also likely wanted to distance myself from the “monopoly on meaning” of my predominantly Catholic environment. I do not want my personal decision as a young person to embrace Judaism to be understood as a value judgment against other religions. “It is rather the case that God places people exactly where God has a task for them. No more and no less.” I am currently a member of the Sukkat Schalom synagogue congregation in Berlin (since 2013) and the West London Synagogue of British Jews in London (since 2016). From 1998 to 2016, I was also a member of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London.

After graduating from high school, I studied theology, philosophy, and Judaic studies with scholarships from the Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes (the German National Academic Foundation) and the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service). Because admission to Leo Baeck College London required an undergraduate degree—a concept not recognized in the German educational system—I studied Protestant theology at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich with the permission of the Rabbinate of the Jewish Community of Berlin and graduated in 1986 with a “Bachelor theologiae seu divinitatis” with a thesis in Hebrew Bible on Deuteronomy 26 and its reception in the Midrash of the Passover Haggadah.³² As a non-Christian, I was granted a special exemption by the Faculty of Theology for this degree. The selection of courses was approved in writing each semester by the Rabbinate in Berlin, with a view to my further studies at a rabbinical seminary. I passed my Hebrew language exam in 1984 and worked at the Chair of Old Testament Studies as a tutor for “Fundamental Questions of the Old Testament.” In addition, I worked for the Berlin Rabbinate as a religious education teacher and with the U.S. Armed Forces stationed in Munich as a lay leader in the Jewish Chaplaincy Program at the Army Base. I continued my studies at Leo Baeck College in London. For this, I received recommendations from Rabbi Ernst M. Stein (Berlin), Rabbi Dr Walter Jacob (Pittsburgh), and Rabbi Captain H. Richard White (U.S. Army). Rabbi Jacob, whom I had met in 1985 at the rededication of the Augsburg synagogue, wrote to Gerard Daniel, then president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism: “It seems to me that an able young man like this one should be given an opportunity to study for the rabbinate even if it is unclear how he may serve the Jewish people subsequently. You may be perfectly right that he would not be appropriate for the German Jewish community as it is presently constituted. On the other hand, he may develop into just the ideal rabbi for them.”³³ By 1985, the Jewish community in West Germany had dwindled to 26,000 people with little hope for its continued existence.

Aside from Berlin, there was little progressive Jewish life and possibly no prospects for a young liberal rabbi.

In 1986, Leo Baeck College in London admitted me to its rabbinical program. I enjoyed continuing my studies and loved working in my congregation as a rabbinical student at Barkingside Progressive. My teachers even suggested that I begin a PhD thesis alongside my program at Leo Baeck College. In November 1986, Rabbi Julia Neuberger (now Baroness Neuberger of Primrose Hill, DBE) wrote to King's College London: "Walter Homolka has been studying at the Leo Baeck College since the beginning of this academic year. He is of quite exceptional ability and will clearly have a great deal of time to take on further academic work at the same time as his rabbinical course. It therefore seems sensible for him to embark on the PhD program at this time, and his subject—the relationship between Leo Baeck and Martin Luther—ties in extremely well with his rabbinical work. I have been extremely impressed with the work he has done in my Bible seminar. It is an introductory course, and Walter Homolka is clearly far too advanced for it. He has, however, contributed considerably to it and been immensely helpful to the other students. I would recommend him most highly as a doctoral student".

Walter Jacob's biographer, Eric Lidji, describes what happened next: "In his first year of rabbinical school in London, Homolka realized he was gay, and his subsequent effort to understand the ramifications of his circumstances led him to the responsum that Walter wrote in 1981 opposing gays and lesbians holding leadership positions within congregations.³⁴ Taking the message to heart, Homolka quit rabbinical school. At the time, he explained his decision as a simple change of heart about entering the rabbinate. He has since been open about the true nature of his decision, but has never discussed the matter with his mentor".³⁵

I could see how difficult it was for the first two openly lesbian students, Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah and Sheila Shulman, to fight their way through to ordination. Many who appreciated my work were opposed to these two fellow students. Furthermore, it seemed completely unrealistic to me that I could return to Germany later as a gay rabbi. That is why I returned to Munich in 1988, enrolled at the Hochschule für Philosophie, and earned a certificate in adult education in 1989. That same year, I was given the opportunity to start as a trainee through an internship in the securities division of Bayerische Hypotheken- und Wechsel-Bank AG. I worked in asset allocation and wealth management, eventually becoming the deputy head of the training department. From there, I moved to the Bertelsmann Book Group (now Penguin Random House) from 1992 to 1999, serving as assistant to the CEO and later as head of the executive staff. In 1992, I also earned my doctorate from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London with a dissertation on Leo Baeck and German Protestantism. My external examiner was Rabbi Dr Albert H. Friedlander, Dean of Leo Baeck College. In 1993, I received a Master of Philosophy in Jewish Studies from St. David's University College in Lampeter (Wales). I thus combined my theoretical interests with my work as an executive manager.

In the meantime, the Jewish landscape in Germany had changed completely. After reunification in 1990, over 212,000 immigrants of Jewish origin from the former Soviet Union came to Germany, posing an incredible challenge to the tight-knit structures of Jewish life. How were 26,000 ageing Jewish community members supposed to integrate some 200,000 new arrivals and introduce them to their Jewish tradition?

This influx of new community members also undermined the argument that a Jewish community should, in principle, be run in an Orthodox manner, as a sort of lowest common denominator.

In Munich, the independent Liberal Jewish Community Beth Shalom was established. It marked the beginning of a Liberal Jewish movement in Germany. “The congregation emerged following the closure of American military installations across the country at the end of the Cold War. The withdrawal of the U.S. Army from Munich deprived a group of liberal-minded American Jewish expatriates living in the city of regular religious services and classes led by a military chaplain. To continue their religious practices as they preferred, these families started a Sunday school and later a prayer group. It quickly expanded, becoming a new congregation organized outside the state structure. Several German-born Jews joined, Homolka among them.”³⁶

One thing was clear: without rabbinical authority, this new beginning would not succeed, partly due to powerful opposition from the Orthodox establishment. I therefore asked my longtime mentor, Walter Jacob, whether he would like to return to his Bavarian homeland to serve as a rabbi in Munich. His biographer Eric Lidji writes: “By accepting the position, he unexpectedly and unassumingly became the sixteenth generation in his family to serve in the rabbinate in Central Europe, fulfilling the potential that had seemingly been stolen from him and his family when they fled the country.”³⁷

“Working pro bono, Walter traveled to Munich with [his wife] Irene every few months to provide spiritual leadership for the congregation. By extension, he also provided practical organizational leadership for the wider movement to re-establish liberal Judaism throughout Central Europe. ... He also helped the group in Munich establish the basic elements of communal life, from leading conversion classes, to assembling a religious library, to helping create the umbrella association that would allow liberal congregations to petition the government with a single voice.”³⁸ “Walter declined to move to Munich. From the beginning, he saw his position as a temporary solution until the congregation could find a committed liberal rabbi who understood local culture, language, and politics.”³⁹

Unfortunately, the emerging German movement could not secure rabbinic leadership from abroad. Germany simply was not an attractive place to go. There were fierce battles between the Orthodox and the new progressive alternative over the question of what constituted authentic Judaism. And the daughter of my teacher, Rabbi Albert H. Friedlander, Ariel, was reluctant to take the pulpit in Munich after having recently been ordained by Hebrew Union College in the U.S. She felt that the task would be too much for a lesbian under constant Orthodox attack. So, Rabbi Moshe Zemer, a friend and colleague of Walter Jacob at the Solomon B. Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah, concluded: “You have to do it!”

Moshe Zemer writes to Walter Jacob in a letter dated September 24, 1996: “You were absolutely right in your assessment of Walter Homolka. [...]. I must say that I am extremely impressed by Walter’s more than ten years of Jewish education and training [...], and the active role he played in establishing progressive Judaism here in a rather hostile Orthodox environment. All this led me to explore with him the possibility of completing what you had encouraged years ago: namely, ordination. I have no doubt in my mind: Walter has more than fulfilled the requirements for ordination in all of our seminaries, with the possible exception of Jerusalem. He certainly knows more than most rabbis we ordain nowadays, not only in the academic field but also in organizational and

managerial matters, having pursued his activities so successfully within the liberal context. [...] I trust that you agree with me: Walter is eminently equipped and qualified for rabbinic ordination. If he was bored at LBC and left in his early twenties to earn some degrees and pursue a highly successful executive career, it is obvious to me that returning to one of our seminaries would be unnecessary, if not impossible, given his current professional occupation.[...] The chances of securing a qualified rabbi for this promising congregation in Munich are almost nil. The president of Beth Shalom, Ms. Lauren Rid, and other board members spoke to me about the possibility of appointing Walter as their rabbi, if and when he is ordained.”

By 1997, the Reform movement in America had been changing its position on issues of homosexuality and leadership over a decade of deliberations. However, the question arose: how to ordain me in a way that maintained the high standards of the profession? Informal discussions with the principal of Leo Baeck College, Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet, took place in October 1996. I wrote to him on October 16: “Dear Jonathan, thank you very much for the path you opened up for me during our telephone conversation last night. I have informed Walter Jacob accordingly. He will most certainly write the recommendation for the College and supervise my progress at Beth Shalom”. During a conference to mark the fortieth anniversary of Leo Baeck’s passing on November 15–17, 1996, the Munich liberal congregation formally approached the College to consider my readmission and the evaluation of my studies with a view to ordination.

On January 1, 1997, Rabbi Dr John D. Rayner of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London wrote to me in a letter: “Your application was considered by the Leo Baeck College Academic Board the other day, and I expect Jonathan Magonet has written to you about it. In any case, it is not for me to report, but perhaps it is appropriate for me to say that, while there was a reluctance to ‘bend the rules,’ nevertheless there seemed to be general agreement with my view that, subject to that proviso, your application should be treated in the most sympathetic way possible.” Thus, I was invited to attend the College for interviews on February 3, 1997, and met with the Admissions Board between February 25 and 27.

The Dean of Leo Baeck College, Rabbi Albert H. Friedlander, wrote to the Board of Admissions on February 18, 1997: “[...] I have closely monitored his progress over the years, including his Ph.D. examination; and I have witnessed his remarkable work with the Jewish community in Germany. I can and do vouch for his total commitment to Judaism and to the task he has set for himself. [...] Over the past year, I have observed him officiating at Shabbat services in the Munich community and at various conferences. He has always been a credit to us. Therefore, I would appreciate it if he could be ordained with the ‘97 class. If there is an issue and a separate ordination is suggested, it should take place very close to that time, certainly before the fall of 1997, so that he can serve the Jewish community in Germany.”

On March 3, 1997, LBC registrar John Olbrich wrote about the results of my meeting with the Board of Admissions: “The Board was impressed with the enormous contribution you are making to the development of Progressive Judaism in Germany and the work you have also done on behalf of the college. In light of this, they saw no difficulty arising from your receiving a private rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Dr. Walter Jacob and Rabbi Moshe Zemer.” In this letter, the LBC also offered an institutional ordination “on the basis of a full-time course for one year or a part-time course over three years.”

It was decided that, based on this evaluation by Leo Baeck College, ordination would be conferred on June 2, 1997, at Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh, with a former LBC professor of mine, Rabbi Professor Allen H. Podet of Buffalo State University in New York, serving as the third rabbi. The Principal of LBC, Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet, stated on April 11, 1997: “Dr. Walter Homolka, a former student at Leo Baeck College, appeared before the Admissions Board between February 25 and 27, 1997, so that the College could evaluate his studies at other institutions over the previous decade in order to assess whether he had fulfilled the requirements for rabbinical ordination at Leo Baeck College. We considered the studies he had pursued at Leo Baeck College and the universities of London, Wales, Greenwich, Leipzig, and Munich. His academic achievements there and his various publications in the areas of Scripture and post-biblical literature, Jewish philosophy, theology and ethics, Jewish history, and religious education have impressed us. We also acknowledged his foundational training in homiletics, clinical and industrial pastoral work, as well as pastoral psychology. Although the specific scope of his studies does not fully align with those required for ordination by the Leo Baeck College, we saw no difficulty with the recommendation that the title ‘Rabbi and teacher in Israel’ be conferred upon him by way of rabbinical ordination through Rabbi Dr. Walter Jacob of Pittsburgh and other learned and respected colleagues in the rabbinate. The College recognizes the significant contribution Dr. Homolka is making to the development of progressive Judaism in Germany. We offer our support and guidance for his continued learning on his path of congregational service. We wish Dr. Homolka well in his service to the Jewish community.”

On June 2, 1997, the ordination took place with the LBC’s permission. A few weeks later, Walter Jacob traveled to Germany to install me as his successor as rabbi of the Beth Shalom congregation. After that, the LBC integrated me into their Rabbinic-In-Service-Training (RIST), which typically supports newly ordained rabbis during the first two years following their ordination. And the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues of Great Britain admitted me into its Rabbinic Conference. Furthermore, the dean of the Leo Baeck College, Rabbi Dr Albert H. Friedlander, issued an *iggeret reshut*, a legal document confirming the ordination with his personal authority.

Ruth Cohen, Chair of the European Region of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, wrote in a letter dated June 10, 1997: “Please accept our warmest congratulations, from all your friends and colleagues in the European Region, on your ordination to the rabbinate. Your contribution to Progressive Judaism in Germany and elsewhere has already been enormous, and we are indeed fortunate to benefit from your dedication, energy, and talent. I very much look forward to being with you for your induction as Munich’s Liberal Rabbi.”

Walter Jacob, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and longtime chairman of its responsa committee, published an essay supporting his decision in the winter edition of the *CCAR Journal—A Reform Jewish Quarterly*: “Privately ordained individuals should be denied both admission to the CCAR and placement, unless the circumstances are unusual and the candidate meets all the appropriate requirements. [...] Private ordination remains a possibility; it offers a model for adaptation and survival in times of crisis, but it is not appropriate for us in North America. It may be useful today in countries where different conditions prevail, or in the future, under other circumstances. [...] There are many countries in which the number of Liberal rabbis is very small and

will only grow slowly, primarily because of political problems. Qualified candidates there may not have the opportunity to be ordained except privately. Such ordination should be encouraged under those circumstances.”⁴⁰

Eric Lidji comments on this: “Walter [Jacob] understood the usefulness of private ordination in certain situations because of his grandfather Benno Jacob’s experience. After the dean of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau had refused to sign his ordination papers, Benno turned to a special council of rabbis. In that case, the complication involved a personal dispute between an administrator and a strong-willed student. The complication for rabbinical students such as Homolka arose from a misalignment between the needs of emerging Jewish communities and the policies of established Jewish institutions.”⁴¹

The Formation of a German Progressive Movement and a Reform Seminary

The day of the induction was also the day the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland was formed. Some forty liberal Jewish groups in Central Europe had founded a progressive umbrella organization. Eric Lidji: “Their lay leaders were largely self-taught and craved training, and all of the groups except those in a few major cities needed permanent rabbis.”⁴² With the new Union of Progressive Jews in place, Walter Jacob and I turned our attention to addressing the lack of liberal Jewish leadership in Central Europe. “By creating a curriculum within those existing university offerings, they could start training students with minimal overhead. And because the state-owned higher education system was free, students enrolled in the program would not have to pay tuition.”⁴³

We decided to partner with the University of Potsdam to establish Abraham Geiger College in 1999. Our goal was to provide training of the highest standards. The original plan was to recruit Rabbi Dr Nicholas de Lange of the University of Cambridge to serve as the new school’s head in time for its official opening in 2001. Unfortunately, our efforts were unsuccessful, and Rabbi Professor Allen Howard Podet became the founding director. By then, I had moved from Penguin Random House to the environmental advocacy group Greenpeace in Hamburg, where I became its German director at the turn of the twenty-first century and served pro bono as regional rabbi for the state of Lower Saxony, inducted by the principal of the Leo Baeck College, Rabbi Prof. Jonathan Magonet. . Subsequently, I moved to Deutsche Bank, serving as head of philanthropy at its Frankfurt headquarters until 2003.

When Rabbi Podet’s term as a German Academic Exchange Service professor ended, it became apparent that no one could be found to take on the challenging task of developing a rabbinical school. So, I left the business sector to dedicate myself to this task.

Over the next twenty years, we established a successful rabbinical school with high academic standards.⁴⁴ In 2007, I was appointed an honorary professor in the Department of Humanities at the University of Potsdam. When the German Science Council recommended in January 2010 that Islamic theology should complement Christian theologies, we reminded the authorities that the pluralization of theologies at state universities would only be complete with an Institute of Jewish Theology at a German university. The deliberations regarding this fascinating new perspective took three years. Then, Jewish theology as a subject became a reality.⁴⁵

Reform Judaism Acting Authentically and Authoritatively

All these various steps were taken with the consent and appreciation of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and its European Region. The World Union gave us the authority to develop this academic training site for progressive rabbis and cantors, and I, as an elected officer, rightfully exerted that authority. From 1997 to 2000 and again from 2004 onward, I served on the Governing Body of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. From 1997 to 2000, I was a member of the Executive Board of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland; from 2017 to 2022, I served as Chair of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany; and until 2018, I was Vice President of the European Union for Progressive Judaism and from 2016 to 2023 a member of the Executive Board of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. This also gave me the necessary authority to drive these innovative developments forward on behalf of liberal Judaism. I cherished my many years of membership in the CCAR in my capacity as the rector of Abraham Geiger College.

Since my ordination almost thirty years ago, there have been many acts of hostility, especially from within the Central Council of Jews in Germany. The latest has been published now in this issue of *Theology & Science*. My non-Jewish background has been used to deny my authenticity. My studies in Christian theology have been used to accuse me of wavering in my religious convictions. My coming out as a gay man has led to hatred and hostility. But I have never regretted my decision to live as a Jew. I reject any attempt to interpret Judaism in racial terms and to dismiss Jews of conviction as second-class Jews. In this regard, I share my teacher Rabbi Jonathan Magonet's insight. He once said, "Today, anyone can shed their Judaism and disappear into anonymity." Or one can choose a Jewish identity. In that sense, today all Jews are Jews by conviction, whatever their background may be. I am happy to commit myself to such a form of Judaism.

Looking back, I can say: I have never considered myself the best candidate for the tasks ahead. However, I was often the only one willing to accept the challenge. And I was prepared to get on with it.

Who Can Speak for Progressive Judaism in Germany?

Yiftach Fehige endeavors to present his issue as a scholarly struggle over Jewish theology as a science, when it pertains more to the matter of who shall oversee the training of Reform rabbis—the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany or the Central Council of Jews in Germany?

The World Union for Progressive Judaism and its constituents have made it clear that their status as a religious community is a prerequisite for their role as sponsors of progressive rabbinical training and of the School of Jewish Theology. Fehige appears to challenge this position and seems to lend support to the takeover attempts by the Central Council of Jews in Germany. He speculates: "Given all these developments, it is difficult to see a future for the AGK and ZFK in Potsdam."

The president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, Rabbi Sergio Bergman, publicly affirmed on June 26, 2025, that "the WUPJ, as the global representative body of Reform Judaism, hereby affirms its full support for the continued recognition of the Abraham Geiger Kolleg as the sole seminary representing Reform Judaism in Germany."⁴⁶

In the case of the supposedly liberal Regina Jonas Seminar, a program run by the Nathan Peter Levinson Foundation, the Central Council of Jews has, through the Jüdischer Liberal-Egalitärer Verband (JLEV), formed its own supposedly progressive group that has no international recognition and no independent constitutional status as a religious community, but is rather a loose project without any legal capacity. However, the training of rabbis and cantors is tied to a specific denomination and can only be conducted by a religious community. The Central Council of Jews in Germany does not meet this requirement: “In any case, the Central Council is not a religious community in the sense of state church law, whereas the individual congregations certainly are. [...] The Central Council acts as the representative body of a collective of similar religious communities”.⁴⁷

Will the Central Council Receive Recognition from Reform?

Regarding the programs sponsored by the Levinson Foundation, Fehige states that “Likewise, there is no conceptual reason why the RJS, AJHS, or LLS could not continue to train and ordain clergy independently of a university-based Jewish theology department. It is therefore conceivable—though this remains speculative—that rabbinical and cantorial formation in Potsdam might proceed with a stronger reliance on ‘Jewish Studies’ rather than on a distinct academic field of ‘Jewish Theology.’ That’s somewhat reminiscent of Paul Feyerabend’s ‘anything goes’ principle. It is a fact that clergy training is the domain of the respective religious community. It needs to be exerted by a predominant Jewish faculty to safeguard authenticity. Jewish Studies at the University of Potsdam, however, is a secular cultural studies program with a predominantly non-Jewish faculty. Fehige’s proposal is therefore rather unlikely and would also be a great defeat for the goal of progressive Judaism to exert the right of ownership to shape its own identity. If the Central Council wanted to use Jewish Studies as a preparation for the rabbinate it could have done so since 1979 at its own Hochschule für Jüdische Studien” (Jewish Studies College) in Heidelberg. Apparently, no rabbis have ever come from there, and no rabbinical seminary in the world has accepted this training as partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination.

The future of the Regina Jonas Seminary, sponsored by the Levinson Foundation, is uncertain. Students who enroll there have little chance of finding employment in congregations affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) anywhere in the world, as its president, Rabbi Sergio Bergman, informed Alexander Dobrindt, the Federal Minister of the Interior and Homeland Affairs, on July 17, 2025: “Die in der Nathan Peter Levinson Stiftung angebotene Ausbildung ist ohne jegliche Anerkennung im liberalen Judentum, ihr wird im liberalen Judentum weltweit kein Vertrauen entgegengebracht! Dort gegebenenfalls ausgebildete Studierende werden keine Stellen, weder in Deutschland noch in Europa noch weltweit erhalten.” (“The training offered by the Nathan Peter Levinson Foundation is not recognized in any way by Liberal Judaism, and it is not trusted by Liberal Jewish communities worldwide! Students who may have been trained there will not be able to secure positions, neither in Germany nor in Europe nor anywhere else in the world”).

On May 17, 2026, the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany cut the last institutional connection with the Central Council of Jews in Germany. It dissolved the joint endeavor of a non-orthodox rabbinical court open to all Jewish congregations. This follows the erection of a separate Liberal Association of Rabbis, Liberale Rabbinervereinigung, in

2024. As for the Abraham Geiger College, I would like to point out that on November 6, 2025, new rabbis were ordained in Berlin's largest synagogue, on Rykestraße. The German Federal Minister of Education, Karin Prien (CDU), and the Vice President of the German Federal Parliament, Bodo Ramelow (Die Linke), addressed the gathering. The festive service was conducted with members of the European Cantors Association. This year, the graduation of a sizeable class is expected as well.

State Funding for Jewish Communities—an Anomaly?

Fehige states that the Central Council represents “approximately 100,000 affiliated Jews.” According to the community statistics for 2024, there were 89,197 members.⁴⁸ Currently, Jewish life in Germany is supported at the federal level with €22 million in annual tax-derived subsidies, with additional agreements in the 16 federal states. The Jewish Community in Berlin alone, with roughly 8,000 members, receives €16,8 million annually from the state.⁴⁹ This raises important questions about eligibility and decision-making for allocating these funds. The Union of Progressive Jews in Germany has a complaint pending before the Federal Constitutional Court on this matter—a highly publicized issue which the author neglects to mention.⁵⁰

Fehige suggests that state support is merely an attempt by German politicians to create a symbolic Jewish presence. In doing so, he ignores the broader context: other religious communities also receive considerable state subsidies, as long as they support the values of the German constitution of harmonious cooperation. The omission of these constitutional considerations somewhat undermines his claims of the emergence of Jewish theology and the competition among Jewish denominations for public funding and authority in clergy training.

Conclusion

The analysis above shows that Fehige demonstrates a rather limited grasp of the subject matter in his paper. His treatment of key concepts, such as the historical divisions within theology or the organizational structures of Jewish communities in Germany, frequently lacks depth and accuracy. This is further compounded by his tendency to dismiss established frameworks and ignore relevant developments in intellectual history, as well as his failure to provide precise facts and figures when they are readily available.

Moreover, Fehige's approach reveals a strong bias that undermines the credibility of his assertions. He often relies on speculation rather than substantiated evidence, particularly when discussing the motives behind the establishment of institutions such as the Abraham Geiger College and the pluralization of theology in Germany. Certainly, it is an unusual approach to honor the legacy of Paul Feyerabend by slandering a colleague's reputation. In current times, when the Jewish people are under great pressure and anti-semitism is on the rise, could we not concentrate on common ground?

Notes

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Disclosure Statement

This response is submitted at the invitation of the Editor to comment on “Jewish Theology as a Science in the Context of Post-Shoa Germany” by German-born Jörg Hermann Yiftach Fehige in this issue of ‘Theology and Science’. Although presented as an objective academic analysis in the context of Paul Feyerabend, the article employs this framing to advance claims against me personally and Reform Judaism in Germany that fall outside the scope of scholarly critique.

Notes on Contributor

Walter Homolka was born in Germany in 1964. He converted to Judaism at age 17 and dedicated over forty years to the re-emergence of Reform Judaism in Germany. Ordained a Reform rabbi in 1997, he served in numerous prominent leadership roles in national and international Reform Judaism, including 20 years as rector of the Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam, a rabbinical seminary, and is currently a professor of Jewish theology at the University of Potsdam. The army colonel (reserve) holds multiple doctorates and has received various high-level national honors, including Knight Commander of Austria and Commander of the German Federal Merit Order. In 2004, he was admitted into the French Legion of Honor.