

Paul de Lagarde on Liberalism, Education, and the Jews: German Writings (1886)

Abstract

Paul de Lagarde (1827–1891) was a theologian and an orientalist; he became professor of oriental languages at the University of Göttingen in 1869. Politically, he was a conservative and a virulent antisemite: his writings have been said to epitomize the “Germanic ideology” that fed into Nazism. The excerpt below is from Lagarde’s *German Writings* [*Deutsche Schriften*]. It begins with an attempt to link the three components of liberalism represented by the “black” (Catholic), “red” (socialist), and “golden” (Jewish) internationals. Lagarde attacks some of German history’s most famous liberals and reformers and calls for the formation of a new conservative party, even though a German Conservative Party, founded in 1876, already existed. He also attacks the declaration of 75 Berlin notables against antisemitism, published in 1880: this was a liberal response to charges by the historian Heinrich von Treitschke and others that Jews were a “foreign body” in German society. For Lagarde, Jews and liberals were confederates, and a true German nationalist had to oppose both.

Source

The Grey International.

Second volume of German Writings: February 1881

The whole world speaks of the black, the red, and the golden International: the grey International is still circulating under the name of liberalism. The time seems ripe to me to endow it with all of its rights. Like its siblings, it is unpatriotic and is therefore the utmost curse upon any country. It rules just as eagerly, however, as the three other members of the family; but power is not actually what it aspires to: Even if it does so unintentionally, it kills one’s conscience and ability to comprehend life as a whole, and it thereby kills one’s personality.

Everything that is useful to humans is the result of their own work. Numerous contemporaries support this statement, although they are not aware of its broad implications. It has been powerfully illustrated in an easily assessable manner by the reparations paid to Germany by France. We would certainly have done quite nicely with those five billion francs if we had earned franc after franc individually. Since they came upon us all at once, however, without us doing anything in return, they remained alien to us, causing a decaying illness that we have not yet overcome and will not overcome for a long time. Precisely the same thing applies to intellectual goods. No nation can be handed the principles of political life, can be given fruits of world culture from the outside: We can never learn such things by heart as we would vocabulary, never borrow them as we would an umbrella; we have to acquire for ourselves any intellectual goods we wish to own. Liberalism—and of course I am speaking only of German liberalism from my own knowledge—is the *Weltanschauung* of those who collect intellectual goods from everywhere, honestly believing that these pieces are their property precisely because they are stored in their chests and shrines. And to the owner wishing to use it, all this gold—as our fairytales already know—proves nothing but coal, even though it really used to be gold. The impression that these owners make on healthy people is one of mentally ill persons who count gilded paper as gold: Wherever such persons come to the fore in the life of nations, they have a corrupting effect on morality in the higher sense because they discredit work, because they pour out treasures—as though these had been won in lottery—in front of those who haven’t the slightest idea what to do with them. But they also have a corrupting effect on morality in a more ordinary sense, because they do not really possess what they

believe they possess, as a result of which, in their case, theory and practice constantly contradict each other. These liberals are reverse [Peter] Schlemihls^[1]: they have the shadow of a body, but not the body itself. Since I definitely wish to avoid being misunderstood, I would like to point out that I have specified very precisely what I mean by liberal here, and that to me liberal is not merely the equivalent of a freedom lover.

People and nations move forward along two paths. They do so either in such a way that over the course of slow growth, each higher stage develops from the next lowest stage, each more perfected level from the less perfect level just below it; or in such a way that, after elemental force has overthrown the inadequate status quo, as a result of the disaster, the protagonists now facing sheer death find themselves compelled to use all of their powers to establish a sufficient state of affairs. Thus, people and nations reach their destination either as the plant reaches its own, or as the shipwrecked person reaches his, floating on a plank of the shattered ship, applying the utmost effort and keenest thinking toward using a shred of the sail so that it may help him in reaching the life-saving shore.

[...]

From everything said so far it follows naturally that Germany had to fall prey to what I call liberalism, i.e., that benevolent people acting both on and without official orders attempted to import something that had not grown in the Fatherland but seemed necessary nonetheless. The Greeks and Romans, the Old and New Testaments, the constitutions of all kinds of countries were supposed to help this poor unlucky enterprise. Yet no one realized that our conditions can only be improved from the very bottom up, by means of unconditional truthfulness; not by familiarization with the real and supposed possessions of others but through the actual elimination of our deficits and errors and through the genuine acquisition of goods that are really essential to us, not to any foreign peoples. No nation derives benefit from a good belonging to another nation just because it is merely a good, but only because it represents a good for it. After all, an individual human being is not able to eat all the foods on earth; he is only supposed to eat those foods that benefit him and only to the extent that they benefit him, since he would otherwise lose the capacity to digest and thus to live.

Liberalism was introduced in Prussian schools by Minister Altenstein and his Councilor Johannes Schulze, and from Prussia it spread all over Germany. This is not the least of the misfortunes plaguing our Fatherland. Our youth lacks a mastery of any language; they have no knowledge of literature; they have not even taken the time to engage thoroughly with the major works of our great writers and sought to understand them; but they have received the essence of everything that there ever has been in the form of prepackaged judgments, and at the end of their schooldays they nearly die of boredom. They are so overfed with notes, so unschooled in the perception of intellectual processes and both literary and rhetorical accomplishments that once they reach university they are incapable of following a lecture without notes, however clear and well thought-out it might be; and for this reason, year after year, nearly all systematic lectures devolve into a sort of dictation.

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People entertained the wish to found a conservative party often enough. But even those who did so could not break free from the liberalism they intended to fight in the first place. After all, the founding of a conservative party is a founding like all others, and even if some prosperous soul were to invest as much of his personal means as necessary to create the appearance of success at first, it is inevitable that the dividends would fail to materialize in the long run, just as they do in other comparable instances. Only nature lives and begets; human will can clear the earth from rocks and thorns and turn over the soil, it can sow the seed, but it is not human will that allows the seeds, with their God-given powers of germination, to grow and flourish in God's air and under God's dew and sun.

The conservative party—if I must speak of a party—will emerge the day the royal Prussian educational system of the Altenstein creed has been toppled, the party press destroyed, the way cleared for the formation of churches. It will take shape the day family honor is acknowledged as a necessary prerequisite for national honor, the day that irrevocable fundamental law of our lives is announced, the one stating that only personal, responsible, and systematic work creates values, that anything individuals do not earn themselves will result in harm, not good, to themselves and their circles, and that the mind and the soul need more than what individuals gain through their own efforts, since it is never the result and material product of life that counts most, but always life itself.

Liberalism has had a particularly unnerving effect on the scholars who today are in their prime.

[...]

Practically all of the scholars in their prime today grew up in an irreligious atmosphere; it is religion, however, that provides human beings with a philosophy of life and a *Weltanschauung* [worldview]. And it proves very difficult for someone who has not already developed a philosophy of life and a *Weltanschauung* of some kind as an adolescent to acquire one as an older person. As a result of a deficit in their education, these scholars have never felt the desire for a *Weltanschauung*, and therefore it is easy to explain how they reached the point of becoming liberal, i.e., of regarding individual facts and the manner in which they are ordered as that alone which is necessary and worth achieving in this incomprehensible life.

It is from these circumstances that the anti-Christian and irreligious bias of German scholarship has sprung. Anyone who calls a *Weltanschauung* his own possesses it either as a gift of the religion of his youth or as something he acquired through tough manhood struggles with a new faith. Each *Weltanschauung* is religious, because the world can only be seen as a whole entity, as something settled and integrated, by an overriding nature or a supreme, clear, and pure will: each religious viewpoint claims to be the only one that is correct and sufficient, or at least to be one absolutely correct and important aspect of a whole entity that is yet unknown. For this reason, every campaign that non-liberals unaffiliated with the reactionary party lead against liberals has the heat of a crusade, whereas every campaign that liberals mount against the former is characterized by scornful coldness and the bigoted hatred of unbelief. The scholars in their prime today will not deny that, when faced with any scholar of non-liberal inclination—no matter if he be the most free-thinking, benevolent, and industrious person imaginable—they begin to feel utter discomfort to the very core: to them, that entire world view smacks of the Middle Ages. In theory, they may strive to do the most justice possible to Christianity and religion; yet, at the bottom of their souls, they remain heathens and are even happy to be heathens. This, however, constitutes a step backwards: One has the right to transcend Christianity but not to regress from it.

[...]

The facts of the case become even clearer if we consider the Jews living right next to us. It is well known that they strive in large numbers and with great fervor to acquire modern education: The success of their efforts has not been such as to elevate them above their own place. Apart from honorable exceptions that merely prove the rule, they have remained Jews despite their education. Our people, which has grown together from such diverse elements and is in no way intolerant, continues to view them as foreigners to this day, despite their education.

What good was the Prussian educational system? Do our conditions exist in spite of it? What good did Falk's *Kulturexamen*^[2] do? Were the young priests who were subjected to it even one iota better than their predecessors, who did not cram a fresh load of culture into their heads after their schooldays?

Finally, what is the result of liberal science but that which one—that is, the uneducated masses indulging their passions—desires and knows? Anyone, however, who does not offer to the times something that extends and leads beyond the present time, which is awkward to contemporaries precisely for this reason, will go unrewarded.

The three fruits of our education are as follows: poor eyesight, utter revulsion for everything that once was, and inaptitude for the future.

At the conclusion of these lines, which were meant only to provoke my readers' own reflections, I should be permitted to address the Jewish question that has now become so urgent, since only those sharing my fundamental views on the value of education can answer this question properly.

The agitation among young people is widespread; the older generations usually think the same way as the younger ones, but they keep quiet for a number of reasons.

Some 70 Berliners, including not a few members of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, have tried to calm that excitement with a declaration issued on November 12, 1880. One can only strongly hope that the scholarly achievements of these men are worth more than their political ones. Their writing is bad, and they do extreme violence to the facts—something that is impermissible even when leaders are in a momentary state of agitation.

No one in Germany contemplates, as those people claim, sinning against the so-called tolerance with respect to Jews. In fact, the Germans' capacity for intolerance seems to have been exhausted by the achievements of the Falk ministry: No one has ever prevented Jews living in Germany from circumcising their sons, eating kosher foods, and keeping the Sabbath and as well as all Jewish holidays.

It is difficult to deny that there are, as those notables affirm, Christians of all parties who deem religion to be the tiding of peace; it would be desirable, however, to have a closer explanation of that sentence, which, in its current formulation, fails to express the nature of the Christian creed.

It is not true that the Jewish tribe bestowed the worship of a unitarian god upon the world. For one thing, most inhabitants of our earth—one only uses the term "world" for "earth" without thinking—know nothing of a unitarian god to this very day, since the majority of humans are, as the Jewish phrase goes, heathens. Furthermore, in almost all of its manifestations, the Christian church also rejects the belief in a unitarian god, since it believes in a holy trinity, and since it considers anyone who speaks of a unitarian god—in contradiction to its own beliefs—as a deliberate enemy of its own nature, which is not characterized by the babbling gospel of peace. Third, the Jews discovered the supposedly unitarian god rather late themselves, because the Decalogue knows Jahve as one god among other gods, the verse of the Torah V 6, 4 is extremely difficult to digest philologically, and the coarse and wiry corporeality of the Jewish god, kneading the first human being according to his own stature and in his own image, strolling through paradise, eating roast veal with Abraham, and revealing himself to Moses from the north side, deprives any existing Jewish monotheism of its value; because it was only the blending of Jewish formulas with Platonic thought that generated what one can properly call monotheism; and finally, because a monotheism brought into being this way is completely meaningless both philosophically and emotionally.

That the Jews are a German tribe—another thing we learn from those notables—probably does not make sense to many. What may cause reservations as well is the fact that those great scholars regard it as the common goal of all members of the German Reich [Empire] to balance out all the past differences that continue to affect the German nation—to which the Jews, incidentally, do not belong. A certain balancing constitutes perhaps a prerequisite to happiness but is certainly not happiness itself; moreover, anyone not named Meyerbeer will know more appealing music than that which proceeds in octave steps

without accompaniment, and thus has no harmony.

The public stance taken by these gentlemen is valuable only insofar as it proves the strength of the movement they condemn. For one usually does not respond to individual occurrences of envy, coarseness, and wantonness with a *pronunciamento* that is only slightly less high-brow than that of the Secession^[3], one whose signatories cherish such a high opinion of themselves that they would be unlikely to throw their illustrious names into the ring for a trifle.

If one deems it conceivable to educate oneself by acquiring certain phrases and acknowledging certain facts, of course it makes no difference whether the person educated in such a fashion emerged as raw material from the rationalist institution of Prussia or from a Talmudist family in Russian Poland. The Gospel, however, does not place upon humans the demand that they be educated, but rather another, much more important one, i.e., that they be born anew. I have already pointed to the fact that Jesus is to Judaism as Copernicus is to Ptolemaeus, and that he probably hit upon the desire for rebirth precisely by way of Judaism. He believed it rather unlikely that its wooden tautology, lacking content, could be overcome by simply covering it up with clothing, as one would dress a mannequin. The two adversaries Graetz and Geiger are joined in agreement that the Pharisaic period was the greatest flourishing of which their nation is capable. Just as it does against the Pharisees, Jesus' word in Matthew 23:27 levels the kind of scathing criticism against our modern-day educational frauds that would be expected from the author of the pronouncement recorded in John 3:3.

Faced with this demand by Jesus and the entire Christian church—I believe that even Socinians, Unitarians, and Protestants of the newest sort would not hesitate to submit to it—the Jews find themselves in a much more unfavorable position than anyone else born of a woman. Initially, the natural human is merely indolent as far as intellectual life is concerned; and the Semite, above all the Jew, is hostile toward it by nature. This is precisely the case because, for a number of reasons not to be listed here, the Gospel was preached first to the Semites, more specifically, to the Jews. Places like Israel—and, because of Israel and the Koran, Arabia, too—knew a degree of intellectual life even before the Gospel and thus cannot be indifferent toward the Gospel. On account of its teachings, they will either become far better or far worse than they were before. This is the most fundamental reason for the lack of success peculiar to Christian missions with respect to Muslims and Jews in particular. Jews and Muslims are not just below the freezing point, as are other peoples who are not born-again, but are in fact considerably lower on the minus scale than others as a result of their previous relationship to the truth: They are not ill, as others are, but hardened. There are humans and peoples for whom Jesus has come, as he himself put it, to sit in judgment.

I have already explained many times that, as long as it lives, each religion must claim to be the only true religion. As a result, I would also forgive Judaism for intolerance, but only the kind of Judaism that would represent religion. I have not known such Judaism in the form of an official synagogue for almost two millennia, however; I only know such Judaism as the religion of individuals whose existence would be denied by no one who recalls that Jesus was a Jew as well, and that according to Jesus, the spirit blows where it chooses. Because the church assumed responsibility for the task that the later prophets assigned to their nation—a task that the nation was unable to solve, and because the church deepened and spiritualized these tasks just as the Platonists had deepened and spiritualized the Pentateuch's crudely sensual tale of humans being made in the image of god, and because Israel did not wish to hear that it was rightly forced to hand over control, Israel sank so low as to view dominance over other peoples as its only ideal, but failed to anticipate dominance as the inherent consequence of the blessing it would have brought to the earth. Post-Christian Israel is to historical development as the new Schelling is to Hegel, as Beust and Harry Arnim are to Bismarck, i.e., it is an impotent envier and yapper.

By the way, one is quite mistaken if one believes the Jewish question to be a question of religion and tolerance. It is just as much an issue of power as the Catholic question is, except that Rome at least has

not overrun Germany with Catholicism to the extent that anti-evangelical Judaism has done with ancient Israel for centuries. Also, for modern Jewry, monetary possessions and the monopolization of the press are not ends in themselves but rather a means toward dominance.

Our mission vis-à-vis the Jews in Germany—it is unfortunate that we cannot sharply separate these Jews from the Jews resembling them in the remaining countries—our mission will not be dictated to us by love of our neighbor (compare the Torah V 15:3; 17:15; 23:20; 21) but by love of our enemy. This love of our enemy, however, would be cowardly were it not to offer a clear portrayal of the actual state of affairs, were it not to spell out that Jews could very well be accepted in a Germany that incorporates so many foreign elements—and that they have been, in many cases, to the great delight of their friends—but that they can and may only be accepted at the price of emphatically renouncing the Asiatic or Egyptian caste system of the Kohens and Levis that necessarily regards its proselytes merely as second-class Jews, of renouncing their insistence on being in a preferential state of grace, their claims to world dominance, the links with their blood relations living outside of Germany, and their religion, which consists of a worthless statistical note and the most grotesque rites. The love of our neighbors, however, would also be cowardly were it not to tell Germans that Germany will only be capable of amalgamating those Jews seeking kinship with the nation's existing children when it has bid farewell to commonplace views about liberating education, as the expression goes, and when, instead of this liberating education, it has recognized and experienced for itself the internally binding new birth that comes from the holy spirit, and has made this the most essential element in its innermost, historically grown nature. However clearly this seems to be expressed to me, to avoid all misunderstandings, I will add to these sentences the explicit explanation already contained within them: a superficial withdrawal from a Judaism that has been utterly disgraceful for 1,800 years and has not contributed one iota to history for almost 2,000 years, and a superficial entry into a Germany not conceived as the result of a roughly 2,000-year history is pointless, indeed nothing short of harmful.

[...]

No one is capable of escaping the influence of life as it assails one from all sides. If the Jews in Germany currently remain an alien element, this circumstance proves that life in Germany is not vigorous and serious enough. The nation, however, has a duty to remedy this very considerable defect. Every Jew who is a nuisance to us represents a serious reproach to the authenticity and truthfulness of our Germanness. But the nation cannot live vigorously and seriously itself—and by this “itself,” I mean both for itself and unto itself—if the governments fail to remove the burden from its neck and soul, which are weighed down by a well-meaning, but very naïve, liberalism, of which the Prussian educational system and the established church system are the worst components. Our Jews, though, will still not cease to be Jews, even when that burden is thrown off, if our governments fail to put an end not only to that liberalism but also to the dreadful accrual of debt in the state and the municipalities, upon whose interest the Jews have built their material livelihood easily and contemptuously. The Jews will remain Jews because we are too highly educated; they remain Jews not merely owing to our fault but also owing to what we owe. The answer to the Jewish question will be prepared not by the ministries of justice and of the interior, but by the ministries of culture—let me be perfectly clear: I am not saying the ministry of education—and of finances. It will be brought to a conclusion only by the German people in whom that same hot life that melts foreign ice must also pulsate in peacetime. During the last war, that hot life even drew those Palestine Jews living among us, those who had reached the age of compulsory service, into the path of German feeling and German action, much to our satisfaction.

Only anti-liberals are true friends of the Jews, just as only anti-liberals are true friends of Germany. Jews and liberals are natural allies, for they are not natural types but artificial products. Anyone who does not want the German Reich to be a playground for homunculi has to take a stand against Jews and liberals—the latter term understood as explained above.

I would like to sum up:

The greatest praise the German nation confers is that of authenticity. Now you judge what this nation must think of those who view themselves as the educated lot vis-à-vis this people; now you judge how it must regard the conditions in the state, the schools, and the church; you decide for yourself how German the new Reich seems to Germans.

On our own, we are not capable of helping ourselves achieve authenticity; therefore, the governments have to do their share by deliberately removing anything that is artificially made, and by fostering, under the steady eye of informed love, the growth of that which will spring forth from old ground cleared of rubble—thus far the roots of our nature are still alive.

NOTES

[1] This refers to Peter Schlemihl, the character who loses his shadow in Adalbert Chamisso's novella *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* [*Peter Schlemihl's Amazing Tale*]*—trans.*

[2] The aptitude test for members of the clergy instituted by the Prussian Minister of Culture Adalbert Falk in 1873*—trans.*

[3] A group on the left wing of the National Liberal Party who seceded from it in 1880 because they disapproved of their party's support for protective tariffs and other elements of Bismarck's program.

Source: Paul de Lagarde, "Die graue Internationale" (February 1881), in *Deutsche Schriften. Gesamtausgabe letzter Hand*. Göttingen: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1886, pp. 399–414.

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Recommended Citation: Paul de Lagarde on Liberalism, Education, and the Jews: German Writings (1886), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1774>> [April 28, 2024].