A Category Twice Mistaken: Religion and the Double Erasure of Jews on Campus

As the Associate Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Minnesota, I regularly confront the consequences of working and teaching in a system that largely misunderstands and often ignores the complex status and identities of Jews and the Jewish experience. These consequences unfold in the classroom, in connection to my administrative and leadership duties, and in the campus life of my students and colleagues. Ironically, campus equity initiatives intended to protect and support the diversity of communities on campus often compound the challenges for Jews instead, particularly when they are framed as supporting “religious diversity.” How could such a thing happen? Let me start with fundamentals.

In the beginning, Academia created categories, and those categories were in fact chaotic, incommensurate with that which they purported to describe. But academics cast light on that which they could see, based on their worldview, and they left the rest in darkness. And one of those categories was named Religion, which became known in the lands to the west as religious studies. And the worldview of religious studies was essentially Christian, and religious identity was essentially creedal and dogmatic, a question of faith and beliefs.

Now, the Jews and Jewishness--which I am very carefully not calling Judaism--do not easily fit into this construct, this category, because Jewishness is not merely religion, that incommensurate category for which there was no word in Hebrew, and the Jews never saw
themselves as being merely a religion, but rather as a nation following a shared way of life, a distinct people.

But when Christianity became the dominant power in the West starting in late antiquity, Jewishness was assigned a dual identity, still a distinct people, a people to be humiliated, but also a constellation of beliefs, a wrong-headed and stubborn one. That dual status continued in the European context, which is the context that underlies the historical memory of most but by no means all American Jews, until the latter half of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. At that point emancipation in Europe offered Jews the prospect of citizenship and some measure of civic rights and responsibilities, in exchange for them casting off their separate national and cultural identity and being reconstituted merely as adherents of a religion, like the various Protestant denominations and the Catholics. Many Jews eagerly embraced this bargain, thinking equality was on the table, but this same period in which Jews pursued the hoped-for benefits of the Jewish European emancipation was also the period that saw the development and elaboration of racial ideologies, especially in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and those same Jews who agreed to be constituted merely as another religion found themselves refigured as a separate and dangerous race. Anti-Jewish hostility that had been predicated on religious antagonism was transformed into a fully racialized antisemitism, with the eventual consequence that six million Jews were murdered.

Why do I rehearse this history? It bears reviewing because these categories and assumptions, this history, still frame the experience of teaching and administering Jewish Studies at a public university, and it very much frames the experience of students, staff, and faculty at public universities. Being assigned the status “religion” has always been a bad bargain for Jews, and being “merely another religion” while giving up other aspects of Jewish identity has been an
especially bad bargain in the modern world because it was, in the end, entirely one-sided, as Nazi Germany revealed. The implied equality of “one among a diversity of religions,” moreover, has never been honored socially or systemically, and the reductionist understanding of Jewishness necessitated thereby has required that Jews turn their backs on aspects of their identity in order to function socially under this external category, even as it has simultaneously distanced them from the tools for reclaiming or asserting complex cultural identities under the advocating auspices of multiculturalism in recent decades.

Treating Jewishness as merely “religion” has functioned in the minds of non-Jews to turn Jews—imagined always as the descendants of white Europeans even if that does not adequately represent Jews globally or in the U.S.—into some kind of awkwardly situated White Protestant denomination—a fictive denomination that America eventually embraced during the Cold War era under the term “Judeo-Christian,” a term which came to mean Christian with a polite nod to the Jews in the corner who were being erased by rhetorical sleight of hand.

The dynamic I am trying to elaborate is what David Biale in 1998 referred to as “doubly marginal: marginal to the majority culture, but also marginal among minorities.” It is the dynamic David Schraub has more recently elaborated when he writes that “Jews are hit with a double erasure. To put it crudely, there is an erasure from the Right (at least, the more mainstream Right that does not endorse overt antisemitism) that assimilates Jewishness into White and ‘Judeo-Christian,’ thereby denying the existence of an independent Jewish perspective, and a parallel erasure from the Left that validates this assimilation and accepts that it adequately and accurately represents Jews."

That erasure is among other things very much a problem of categorization, and of the incommensurate categories that religion and the field of religious studies have historically helped
to maintain. But as Evelyn Torton Beck observed over three decades ago in “The Politics of Jewish Invisibility,” “If the concept ‘Jew’ does not fit into the categories we have created, then … we need to rethink our categories.” As those committed to interdisciplinarity and breaking out of silos long ago discovered, however, universities can in fact be rather stubborn about holding onto categories, and how much more so when the category carries as much ideological and hegemonic freight as “religion.”

Thus it is precisely as “a religion among many” that Jewishness is primarily figured at the University of Minnesota, with the other complexities of Jewish identity erased, and that erasure has myriad consequences when it comes to the daily work of equity and diversity on campus. The Office for Equity and Diversity website, for example, has links to issues affecting the Jewish experience on the resource page labeled “Religious and Spiritual Identities,” including links to antisemitism resources—even though modern antisemitism is not about religion, it’s about race. The White Nationalists who want to oust Jews from the country are not planning on theological inquisition before they embark on their desired purification of Jews from the American polity.

Yet there is nothing obviously about antisemitism on the “Race, Racism, and White Supremacy” resource page, where it belongs. And though African American and African Studies, Chicano and Latino Studies, American Indian Studies, and American Studies all appear as campus resources on the “Race, Racism, and White Supremacy” page, the Center for Jewish Studies and the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies do not. Any student or university employee looking for resources with regard to the virulent antisemitism of the White Supremacists and White Nationalists in America as they chant “Jews will not replace us,” and whose aggressively antisemitic language is inextricably linked, as Eric Ward has shown, to their poisonous anti-black and other racist slogans, would be hard-pressed to find the appropriate
resources, much less acknowledgement of the crisis at this public university. Yes, antisemitism on college campuses is in the news, but too often only in the context of the Israel-Palestine debate and arguments about who is being silenced by whom—a non-trivial issue on all sides, to be sure, but also one which functions to mask the systemic erasure of the Jewish experience within the American racial context and within the multicultural efforts supposedly dedicated to remediying all vestiges of racism’s pernicious influence, allowing an almost casual antisemitism with deep American roots to grow on this campus and many others.

Similarly, it is that erasure from the Left that accounts not only for the inadequate and misrepresenting pages on the Office for Equity and Diversity website, but also for the complete absence of resources about Jews or antisemitism from the University of Minnesota Gopher Equity Project when it launched last summer—an absence the Center for Jewish Studies and the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies helped remedy. And admittedly, the people responsible for the Gopher Equity Project responded quickly and helpfully when I contacted them about this absence, and it is hard to blame people for overlooking what both their own institution and their culture help render invisible. And yet, is it not the business of a university to make such things visible?

Making antisemitism visible on college campuses requires, therefore, that institutions recognize that they have made a categorical error, mistaking one (potential) aspect of Jewishness—religion—for the whole of it, and that this error is compounded by the fact that the category itself has been flawed from the beginning. Until this error is remedied, equity and diversity initiatives (however well-intentioned) that relegate Jews to the ideologically constrained frame of “religious identities” or “religious diversity” will only continue to harm Jewish students, faculty, and staff.
What would promote more equitable, welcoming, and supportive campuses—my own and across the country? How should equity and diversity initiatives recalibrate what they have conceived of as efforts to protect the religious and spiritual identities of students, faculty, and staff? The answer with regard to Jewishness is as follows:

1) Do not assume that religion as it is conventionally understood within the American context has anything to do with the Jewish experience on campus, although it might (as with absence policies for religious holidays for example), and

2) Do not assume that spirituality as it is conventionally understood within the American context has anything to do with it, although it might, and

3) DO ASSUME that complex identities which are framed by history, culture, ethnicity, and race are at play, because they are, and finally,

4) Make use of the critique the field of religious studies has made of its own beginnings, terminology, and categories, and apply what has been learned thereby to a more inclusive functioning of the university community.

The last point is critical because it subsumes all the others. All too often academic institutions ignore the expertise and authority of their own faculty. Colleges and universities with programs in Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, and Holocaust and Genocide Studies would benefit from consultation with faculty in these disciplines as they plan their equity and diversity work, expanding critically important multicultural initiatives beyond the more limited set of departments that the totalizing forces of American culture have trained administrators to think of as solely falling under that rubric. That too would be a commitment to inclusivity.