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Judaism and the West

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — A new book by Chair and Associate Professor of Religion Robert Erlewine serves as an important contribution to the study of modern Jewish thought.

In *Judaism and the West* (University of Indiana Press, 2016), Erlewine examines the work of five Jewish philosophers in tracing various iterations of Judaism over a 50-year period. The philosophers under study — Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Joseph Soloveitchik — are among the most commonly taught thinkers in Jewish Studies, Erlewine said.

Erlewine emphasized the political, philosophical and theological framework in which their respective works emerge (primarily the 1910s through the 1940s) are not the same from which the Jewish philosophers of today approach their questions. “The questions that lie before us today have to do with pluralism, fragmentation, and the many challenges — moral and political — associated with state power,” Erlewine writes. The chief impetus for his subjects’ thinking lay in contesting Christianity’s assumed religious dominance.

In the 19th century, there was a profound shift in how Europeans thought about the nature of religion, according to Erlewine. “Central to these changing sensibilities was the emerging field of philology, which offered dramatic new possibilities for reconceiving and reconstructing the ancestry and origins of peoples and nations,” Erlewine writes. “These changes in the way that language, identity, history and religion were understood brought increasing pressure on Christianity to shed its Semitic foundations.” Christianity’s relationship to the Old Testament, Greece and Middle East generated heated disputes, he said. “Unraveling the Greco-Hebraic foundations of Europe cast Jews as foreigners in Europe even though they had lived there for millennia. It undermined the basic categories by which European Christians and Jews had previously understood themselves as bound together,” he writes.

Erlewine said he hopes the book attempts to integrate genealogical discussions about the study of religion into the study of modern Jewish philosophy. “I hope the book helps bring the study of modern Jewish philosophy out of its largely self-imposed isolation and emphasizes instead the ways that modern Jewish philosophy is bound up with larger European intellectual currents.”

Erlewine is also the author of *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* (Indiana University Press, 2009). He joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 2006 after earning a Ph.D. in religious studies from Rice University. He is the author of several journal articles on figures in modern Jewish thought. He also served as managing editor of the *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* from 2011 to 2015.