



INTRODUCTION

Who was Walter Benjamin, and what was the religious landscape around him? One of the twentieth century's most fertile and influential thinkers, Benjamin was an upper-middle-class Jewish Berliner who wrote scholarly and journalistic essays that gained a measure of readership during his lifetime but reached a much larger global audience after Hannah Arendt and others promoted his work during the 1960s. Today most graduate students in the humanities and social sciences, and many readers of popular criticism, recognize Benjamin's name and some of his ideas. Trained in the study of literature and philosophy, Benjamin published essays on a wide variety of topics, including nineteenth-century German literature, avant-garde art, popular culture, and the emergence of modern urban life. Religion was not the focus of his life or work, but he engaged with religious thought and ideas much more than most of his friends did. What sparked his interest in religious traditions when his own upbringing was largely secular? Many have already studied the religious dimensions of Benjamin's thought, including interactions with contemporaries Gershom Scholem, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Florens Christian Rang, and

others. The focus of this book, religion *around* Benjamin, is different: by describing and analyzing the religious landscape around Benjamin, I hope to shed new light on his work.

Some readers of Benjamin, following his friend Scholem, consider him a Jewish thinker in the company of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Scholem himself. Buber famously inaugurated a “Jewish renaissance” among middle-class German Jews; Rosenzweig considered converting to Christianity but then joined Buber in reviving Jewish life among Germans while articulating an original philosophical and religious vision in *The Star of Redemption* (1921); and Scholem, Benjamin’s closest lifelong friend, rejected German nationalism and founded the modern study of Jewish mysticism in Palestine. The majority of Benjamin scholarship avoids engagement with religion and assumes Benjamin’s secular identity, starting with his early education in the humanist school of Gustav Wyneken and continuing through his studies of literature and his friendships with Marxists like Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno. A third and more recent set of studies acknowledges the significance of Christianity in Benjamin’s work, including his engagement with contemporary Christian thinkers and writers.¹ As I hope to show, there is nothing unusual about this mixture of elements in Benjamin’s thought. In this he was very much of his own time: There is no need to choose between the Jewish, secular, and Christian engagements of Benjamin’s thought.

In what other ways is Benjamin a person of his time? The question is difficult to answer, since he has typically been portrayed as one outside his own time and place: an outsider to the university, a marginal member of several intellectual circles, and a thinker whose work only reached wide circulation long after his death. Benjamin cultivated personal distance from religious and political institutions; his reluctance to affiliate in these ways reflects a combination of personality, circumstance, and discord between contemporary schools of thought and his own. With his friend Gershom Scholem, Benjamin preferred to discuss religion in terms of ideas and practices beyond anything obvious or typical. Despite his fascination with objects and cultural forms all around him, he was not an ethnographer or demographer of his world.

It is not easy to describe the place of religion in twentieth-century Europe. Unlike the United States, where the First Amendment prevented government establishment of religion, European governments continued to recognize and subsidize official churches. But then as now, rates of religious belief and practice in Europe were much lower than in the United States. In Germany, state and church, often expressed as *Thron und Altar*, were closely linked from the Middle Ages until the Weimar Republic. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rise of nationalism and the emancipation of Jews (the expansion of their civil rights) shifted the terms of the church-state relationship, often strengthening ties between the Protestant majority and the government even as socioeconomic pressures strengthened secular liberal and socialist opposition to the establishment.

This book surveys and analyzes the intellectual, cultural, and social contexts of religion in Walter Benjamin's world. From his childhood in Berlin to his years of study, writing, travel, and exile in France, the historic changes and events of Benjamin's lifetime centrally involved religious culture and institutions. His work restlessly pursues the question of how modern culture inherits tradition and provides overlooked resources for current research. By providing an original perspective on the context of a thinker whose work habitually raised questions about the survival of religion in modernity, this book contributes to wider discussions of religious tradition and secular modernity in religious and cultural studies.

What do Benjamin's religious statements and terms mean? This question divided Benjamin's contemporaries and continues to preoccupy his readers today. *Religion Around Walter Benjamin* addresses the question by examining the places and meanings of religion in Benjamin's intellectual and cultural world. The dominant narrative of secularization obscures the survival of religious traditions Benjamin captured in his work. From his personal identity to his social world, the imbrication of religious tradition with modernity fascinated Benjamin. This investigation of the religious world around Benjamin, with sources other than his own writings, expands our understanding of his life, work, and world.

This project challenges an assumption shared by many readers of Benjamin: that a sharp divide between religious and political concerns explains his work and its significance. One prominent example is Jürgen Habermas, whose “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism” argues that even Adorno failed to see that “his friend was never prepared to completely surrender the theological heritage: that his mimetic theory of language, his messianic theory of history, and his conservative-revolutionary understanding of critique were permanently immunized against the objections of historical materialism.”² Habermas argues that Benjamin’s critique, rooted in theology and opposed to progress, stands in the way of “emancipatory efforts” and “political action.”³ Putting aside whether there is a form of political critique free from theology that engenders emancipatory political action, the deeper assumption Habermas makes, that theology and politics are independent domains best kept apart, is precisely what many Germans in the nineteenth and twentieth century believed, sometimes with disastrous results, and in spite of evidence to the contrary.

Benjamin lived at a time when religious institutions had lost much of the influence they had a century before, even as the discourses and categories of religion remained widely familiar. For Benjamin, modern culture remained religious, despite its apparent secularity, and he chose to study early modern and modern culture with their inheritance of tradition in mind. What makes his work distinctive is his unswerving and often microscopic dual focus on modernism and tradition, along with his suspicion of contemporary claims about religious experience.

Discussions of the role of religion in Benjamin typically engage his writings in relation to his immediate circle. Much less has been written about the religious history and culture around him. *Religion Around Benjamin* attempts to contextualize and integrate the diverse religious and cultural influences on Benjamin’s thought. Behind the fiercely secular, experimental culture of Berlin stood religious traditions and institutions that remained influential before and after World War I. My aim is to broaden the religious frame around discussions of Benjamin’s work to include lived religion—the daily practices of ordinary people—in Benjamin’s world.⁴ The intellectual influences

on Benjamin's work, including dialogues with contemporaries Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Florens Christian Rang, and others, make better sense in that broader context. This book illuminates not only what Benjamin's uses of religion meant but also what he did and did not know about religion, a question that remains too little examined in Benjamin scholarship. This appeal to lived religion has roots in Benjamin's *Berlin Chronicle*, the 1932 precursor to his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, which set out to study "lived Berlin" (*SW* 2:596–97).

By investigating lived religion and religious practices, this book brings attention to an overlooked dimension of Benjamin's work and world. Studies of Benjamin have examined religious thought at length, but they make scarce mention of religious action, a topic also neglected in many studies of modern Europe, especially Berlin. This omission reflects the privileged place for belief and doctrine in scholarship about religion in Benjamin's time and in religious studies since then. Overlooking religious practices confirms ideas that religion is merely belief and religious thought takes place in a vacuum. But as scholarship on lived religion has shown, the study of religious action is necessary for understanding cultural contexts and the lives people live. In Benjamin's world, particularly Berlin, dramatic changes in religious practices reflected broader political and cultural currents that would soon transform the lives of all Europeans.

Benjamin's world registered measurable declines in some religious practices, such as church attendance, while other practices, such as visiting museums and public parks, holiday shopping in department stores, attending political demonstrations, and going to the cinema, took on religious qualities. Investigating such practices as Benjamin did, within cultural and religious traditions, expands the scope of "religion" to the important domain of popular and political culture, without which modern history cannot be understood. The tendency to describe statistical declines in institutional religious life as secularization was prominent in Benjamin's time as it is now, and the study of lived religion around him serves as a chance to consider how to characterize religious change in modern Europe. This attention to lived religion thus affords a discussion of methods in the study of religion. By analogy

to discussions between Benjamin and his contemporaries on the study of experience, this book raises questions about the possibilities and limits of studying lived religion.

Lived religion features in Benjamin's 1929 radio play, "Sketched in Mobile Dust," which relates the story of a traveler in a southern Italian village who joins a crowded religious procession near the cathedral that features music and lanterns. He muses on his place as an outsider in the crowd: "Did no one notice me, or did the man who was lost within this scorching and singing street, the man I more and more became, appear to them as one of their own? This thought filled me with pride; I was overcome with delight. I didn't enter the church; content merely to enjoy the profane part of the festivities, I was heading back with the first satiated participants . . ." ⁵ It is not difficult to imagine Benjamin's character as the self-portrait of a visitor, caught up in the energy of an unfamiliar and beautiful local celebration, musing on the boundary between participant and observer, and stopping short at the entrance to the church without fully entering the religious celebration. Like the Paris *flâneur* and the titular "man of the crowd" from his favorite Edgar Allan Poe story, Benjamin's character loses and immerses himself in public, but in this case the setting is religious. Perhaps because it was safely distant from Berlin and Paris and from the political theologies that troubled him there, Benjamin set many of his most detailed accounts of lived religion in southern Europe.

Why did Benjamin cultivate personal and intellectual distance from the religious institutions around him? His childhood memoir, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, makes a point of saying he skipped the Jewish New Year's services his parents arranged for him to attend (SW3:386). Benjamin's inattention to the lived religion around him, though typical of intellectuals, stands out in the writings of a critic famous for his curiosity about ephemeral and overlooked cultural phenomena. Was he simply a person of his time in this regard? The question is difficult to address, since his reputation often places him ahead of his time as an intellectual pioneer. But in posing the question, this study presents a new approach to the role of religion in his work and asks an even more challenging question, namely: If lived religion was a blind spot in Benjamin's work, what do we learn by filling it in?

Benjamin's serious engagement with religious thinkers and authors set him apart from the secular thinkers of his day, and he wrote groundbreaking studies of the survival of religious tradition in the ostensibly secular culture and art of his time. Benjamin wagered that popular institutions like art, capitalism, and even science carried important religious contents. For such an intellectual omnivore to keep relatively silent about the lived, institutional religion around him is striking. I argue that Benjamin's neglect of lived religion opens a space to consider more fully the workings of religious and secular discourses in his world and in the study of religion generally.

Lived religion goes beyond belief and membership to include what sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman describes as "the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life."⁶ Lived religion includes what people wear, eat, do at home and in public that involves a "spiritual sense" or "sacred presence."⁷ Ammerman, whose work has shaped the field, shifts from the idea of religion as a totalizing worldview to consideration of how informal social practices entail plausibility structures and styles of affiliation of their own.⁸ Embedded within the basic activities and concerns of family, work, and commerce, lived religion and everyday religion comprise forms of life whose study and analysis complicate simple conceptions and narratives about religion and secularity. Lived religion refers not just to the sum of such ordinary practices but to a holistic frame that, according to Robert Orsi, understands "history and culture not as something that religious persons are 'in' but as the media through which they fundamentally are, and that also understands the power of cultural structures and inherited idioms—that Pierre Bourdieu has named the 'habitus'—both to shape and discipline thought and as well to give rise to religious creativity and improvisation."⁹

Meredith B. McGuire also describes the daily practices and lives of people within religious communities, including how they differ from official teaching. McGuire calls attention to the embodied nature of human actions, ways in which abstract teachings and official doctrines take shape in lived experiences. For her, the official versions of religions do not capture the whole story, and only through the study of lived religion can we discover the complexity of religious phenomena.¹⁰ In

this way, the study of lived religion shares some qualities with the study of religious traditions laid out by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Talal Asad, and others. Chakrabarty offers this account of tradition: "But the past also comes to me in ways that I cannot see or figure out—or can see or figure out only retrospectively. It comes to me as taste, as embodied memories, as cultural training of the senses, and reflexes, often as things that I do not even know that I carry." By this account, says Chakrabarty, "I am to some extent a tool in the hands of pasts and traditions."¹¹ In a similar vein, Asad describes tradition as an "empirical arrangement in which discursivity and materiality are connected through the minutiae of everyday living."¹²

For McGuire, Chakrabarty, and Asad, lived religion and traditions are highly complex and sometimes hidden from participants and observers alike. In contrast to Ammerman, who considers lived religion to be a "holistic frame" for human life, these thinkers emphasize the complex, contradictory, and even inscrutable dimensions of lived religion and tradition. These more open-ended approaches reflect the complexity of human beings, the difference between lived reality and religious ideals, and the dynamics of history. For McGuire, this complexity indicates a need to focus on individuals' lives and choices, while for Asad, Chakrabarty, and Ammerman the social level of analysis takes priority.¹³

Of course, the question becomes how to study lived religion, especially when it encompasses such elusive and complex realities. For modern Europe, especially cities like Berlin, lived religion becomes a moving target: we have statistics on affiliation but very little information on participation and the place of religion in people's lives. Benjamin never set out to catalog the religious world around himself, and his work was wide ranging and unsystematic, but I argue that he engaged more with his religious environment than most scholars have noticed, even as he overlooked forms of religious life that had the potential to enrich his investigations of modernity.¹⁴

Sources for the study of lived religion are difficult to find and interpret, especially when it comes to a society from the past where daily life was not widely studied. Research methods in social history and micro-history developed much later than Benjamin's time, and the sources

in this area that do exist tend to focus more on political and economic issues. A fascinating exception to this pattern is Richard Evans's study of highly detailed police records of pub conversations in Hamburg from 1892 to 1914. When local officials in Hamburg began to worry about the growth of the Social Democrats (SPD), the large number of newcomers seeking work, and social tensions related to economic and health crises, they came up with a remarkable plan to send officers into local pubs (*Kneipen*) to listen carefully and record conversations they overheard. These "vigilance officers" were trained not to target individuals or run sting operations but rather to "research" (*erforschen*) local pub culture by observing and recording the conversations and opinions they heard.¹⁵

Though far from rigorous ethnography, these records are rich and wide ranging, and they include at least three observations of relevance to religion around Benjamin. In the records of conversations from the 1890s, police overheard many lively discussions about the tensions between the religion and the secular socialism of the Social Democrats, the fast-growing working-class party. This division could sometimes play out within families, with women choosing the church and working men drawn to the Social Democrats. Citing statistics showing that women were more devout than men in a city with the lowest church attendance in Germany, Evans suggests that the church provided women with the social contact men found in the *Kneipen*.¹⁶ The equivalence is striking, suggesting not that pubs serve a religious function but that religion serves a pub-like function!

A second religious topic discussed by working-class pub goers, perhaps surprisingly, was the role of science and biblical scholarship in casting doubt on traditional religious beliefs.¹⁷ (One can hardly imagine such conversation circulating in pubs or bars today.) A third topic, anti-Semitism, includes predictable comments about Jewish businesses but captures the subtlety of such expressions, noting how one person began such a complaint by saying, "I don't want to be an anti-Semite, but . . ."¹⁸ Unusual for their detail and focus, these pub conversations represent the kind of evidence one would require in abundance to undertake a thorough investigation of lived religion. Biographies and journals are valuable sources, but they are necessarily selective and miss the social scope of sources like these. The scarcity

and limitations of such sources indicate the challenge of studying lived religion in the past.

Lived religion thus provides a useful but limited frame for religion around Benjamin. Historical records, literary texts, and cultural artifacts are necessarily fragmentary, and distance in time prevents direct ethnographic research. Admitting these limitations, I use lived religion as a way to open up the discussion of religion around Benjamin with and against his own writing: *with* in the sense of following his subtle and keen observations of cultural life around him, and *against* both for the silences and oversights of the world around him and the clues his work discloses, unwittingly perhaps, about religion around him. Benjamin's 1912 "Dialogue on the Religiosity of the Present" echoes the typical modern view that religious institutions were moribund, but it also warns against dismissing tradition and embracing "art, science, sport, social life" as ends in themselves. As he often does, he frames these seemingly secular categories with a religious term ("sanctification"): "Have you noticed how the concept of 'end in itself,' this last sanctification of purpose, gets dragged down?" (*EW* 63). Benjamin's autobiographical and travel writings are filled with passing references to religious sites that make little reference to religious communities or observances. Religion was always in the air, yet Benjamin often overlooked the vitality and innovation of religious institutions, even as he considered the religious inheritance of supposedly secular modern culture and engaged with many religious thinkers of his time.

Benjamin's reticence about lived religion was not simply an oversight, however. His encounters with contemporary religious life typically left him disenchanted or critical. Benjamin avoided and criticized the popular revival of Judaism led by Martin Buber, and he disavowed religious institutions that gave political legitimacy to the government. The religious climate of Benjamin's lifetime witnessed the fast decline of many traditional religious practices among Germans, especially in Berlin; the entwinement of state and church, *Thron und Altar*, even after the Weimar constitution replaced the *Wilhelmine* monarchy in 1919; and a highly intellectual approach to religion. The first of these factors, declining religious practice, is often described as secularization, but as many have shown, that term can be misleading. These

religious changes, with the rise of new social and cultural practices and institutions, relate directly to the second factor, the strong ties between church and state. As Benjamin and others showed, religion survived these changes in new forms and with equal or greater political danger. The final feature of religion around Benjamin, the intellectualization of religion, included not just religious thinkers but the broader public.

For modern Germans especially, religion often referred to abstract, external, and exotic phenomena. The routine traditions of Protestant Christianity often drew less attention in public discussion than theoretical debates on the nature of religion and occult or mystical teachings from distant times and places. Benjamin himself minimized the religious life around him in Germany, but he made it a central concern of his travel writings (about Nice and Naples for instance). And unlike much of the research in this area today, the lived religion of the early twentieth century was difficult to document. Personal accounts are anecdotal, and official sources are typically incomplete. The neglect of lived religion in Benjamin was widespread in his time even though the subject of religion preoccupied scholars and the general public alike.

This neglect continues in contemporary German scholarship on religion. Two apparent exceptions to this pattern actually reinforce it. *Aspekte der Alltagsreligion* (*Aspects of Everyday Religion*), for example, includes no detailed description or empirical account of what everyday religion may be, and *Kritik der Alltagsreligion* (*Critique of Everyday Religion*), a sociological discussion of method, includes only brief discussions of such cases as grace before meals, mentions of God and cursing in everyday speech, and the German practice of paying religious taxes.¹⁹ These books both draw heavily from Marxian and structuralist social theory, noting the importance of modern, relatively secular institutions to the contemporary study of religion, but they are both surprisingly reticent on the religious dimensions of these purportedly secular institutions and very light on descriptive evidence.

The complexity of lived religion goes beyond modern Germany. As tempting as it is to pursue lived religion directly, without interference from contexts and concepts, that would be the same as trying to write history “the way it really was,” something Benjamin and others since him have criticized (*SW* 4:391). As soon as the topic of religion appears,

it carries with it a whole set of concepts and histories that shape not only our understanding but also our perception. When we investigate religion as a phenomenon “out there,” we deploy concepts and frameworks to do so. What counts as religion? Who decides? Any study of lived religion requires awareness of how religion is represented and understood. In Benjamin’s Germany, where religion had become a topic of public and intellectual fascination, religion was very often “out there,” beyond the realm of the ordinary, just as Rudolf Otto had described religion as the experience of the “totally other” outside the self.²⁰ The dominant Protestant religion had emphasized belief more than action since the Reformation, leaving discussions of ordinary religious life such as ritual to the study of other religious cultures. One of my goals in exploring religion around Benjamin is to set the study of religion—then and now—in dialogue with the social and historical realities of religious life insofar as they are accessible to our understanding.

Benjamin’s Berlin was a vibrant metropolis where artistic and cultural experimentation emerged from the turbulent modern history of Prussia. Jewish emancipation, the emergence of a German nation-state, the disaster of World War I, and the war’s chaotic aftermath, produced a unique European context in the early twentieth century. Though diminished in their prominence and influence, religious institutions in Berlin, as in Europe generally, remained powerful forces in everyday life. Pedestrians in the central Berlin of Benjamin’s youth would observe monuments to political and military power along with religious structures. Along the River Spree, the Berliner Dom (Berlin Cathedral) stood beside the Berliner Schloss (Berlin Palace). With their stout Baroque designs and central domes, the resemblance between these two massive buildings suggested a balance between religious and political power. Several blocks away, on the Gendarmenmarkt, monumental German and French churches shared a public square with a concert hall and a statue of the poet Schiller.

On a smaller scale, Jewish Berlin straddled the boundaries of institutional religion and the social dynamics of a diverse minority. The elaborate Neue Synagoge (New Synagogue), with its nineteenth-century Orientalist design, rose above Oranienburger Strasse near the *Scheunenviertel*, a working-class Jewish quarter in the middle of the

city. Benjamin grew up to the west, living in several different neighborhoods until his family settled in the prosperous suburban neighborhood of Grunewald. As these architectural examples suggest, Christian and Jewish institutions remained prominent and dynamic in the modern period; their influence had declined, but their presence was self-evident. *Religion Around Walter Benjamin* interweaves descriptions of Benjamin's religious world with discussion of his work in chronologically and thematically organized chapters.

Our story begins with Walter Benjamin's family background as part of the wider history of Jewish emancipation and the formation of Germany in the nineteenth century. Benjamin's parents both came from German Jewish families that his friend Gershom Scholem traced back generations to the eighteenth century.²¹ His father worked in an antiques auction house, and the family lived in the prosperous western suburb of Grunewald. A survey of Benjamin's youth and education reveals how he responded to his own context. As a student and follower of the youth educator Gustav von Wyneken, Benjamin embraced humanistic learning and avoided affiliating either with German or Zionist groups. In a 1912 letter, he rebuffed the Zionism of Ludwig Strauss in language that echoed Martin Luther's legendary statement at Worms. Explaining his cultural Zionism and intention to remain in Germany, Benjamin writes: "I am bound here . . . Here I will stand and, as I must believe, will you also stand" (*GS* 2:838).

In their *Critical Life*, Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings observe that most of Benjamin's close friends were Jewish, yet Benjamin personally had very little contact with Jewish practice or institutions, and his friendships with German Christians like Fritz Heinle and Florens Christian Rang were very important to him (*CL* 13, 46). If the term "German Jewish" suggests a split or divided form of identity, it did not prevent Benjamin and his contemporaries from forming self-understandings that affirmed Jewishness without traditional practice and participation in German culture. Were German Jews German? Benjamin's review of the novel *Jan Heimatlos* by Stephan Lackner, published weeks after Kristallnacht in 1938, suggests the ambiguity of the problem: "While the ties between the German people and the German Jews are being annihilated for an unforeseeable time to come, a novel

has been published which sets out to depict the nature of these ties” (SW 4:134). The review contrasts German Jews to other German people; the religious, ethnic, and political valences of these terms expose the incompleteness of emancipation under nationalism.

The following five chapters follow a generally but not strictly chronological plan. I begin with a discussion of two major trends in German religious history—the emergence of the German nation in 1871 and the earlier establishment of Jewish emancipation. The tension between these events—between religious liberty and religious nationalism—sets the stage for a discussion of religious thought and religious life around Benjamin. A biographical focus is Benjamin’s Jewish identity, a subject of extensive and often heated scholarly discussion. To what extent did his work reflect Jewish ideas? What role did Christianity and secular ideas play? One of the goals of investigating religion around Benjamin is to broaden these discussions. While there can be no doubt that Jewish tradition plays a role in his work, one often finds scholars examining Benjamin’s work in order to demonstrate hidden Jewish associations.²²

The focus of chapter 2 is Benjamin’s Berlin. One of his best works is the memoir of his Berlin childhood in a text that became *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*. Impressions, images, and distant memories appear in short sections with sections named for Berlin locations, like the Tiergarten, Markthalle Magdeburger Platz, and Genthiner Strasse, forming a kind of fragmented collage. This chapter surveys and describes the religious landscape of Benjamin’s city in the context of his youth and education, alternating between the religious geography and demography of the city and Benjamin’s encounters with religion in schools and universities, the youth movement, nationalism, Zionism, and Jewish life.

Chapter 3 addresses the crucial role of World War I in the religious world around Benjamin. With his opposition to the war, Benjamin parted ways with Martin Buber, the leader of a Jewish revival in Germany, and formed a lifelong friendship with fellow Berliner Gershom Scholem, who would shape the modern scholarly study of Jewish mysticism. In Switzerland with Scholem, Benjamin associated with other religious thinkers who opposed the war, including Hugo Ball and Ernst Bloch. While Scholem and others pursued religious

tradition as a primary field of study, Benjamin continued his studies of literature and modern culture, though always with religious tradition in view. This chapter examines religious contexts for debates on the war with particular focus on writers and thinkers who influenced Benjamin, including Buber, Scholem, Ball, and Bloch, as well as Gustav Landauer, Erich Unger, Florens Christian Rang, and Karl Kraus. In the larger context of religious support for the war, among Protestants and Catholics especially, this minority of anti-war intellectuals sheds light on the shape of nationalism and religion at the time. While the world war generated wide support for the German imperial state in union with the support of Protestants and Catholics alike, the destruction and defeat it wrought exposed sharp contours between nationalists and leftists and led to a failed socialist revolution followed by a Weimar government that separated church from state in a new way.

The dramatic changes of the Weimar Republic, which emerged in Germany after World War I, provide the focus of chapter 4. Along with modernist experiments in the arts, political and religious thought flourished in the Weimar years. The jurist Carl Schmitt and the theologian Karl Barth challenged secularism in distinct ways that shaped discussions of religion and politics around Benjamin (and ever since). This chapter surveys the religious landscape of the 1920s in the context of a postwar period of cultural dynamism and political instability. In close dialogue with Christian thinkers, Benjamin's writings from the time experiment with religious and political ideas in modern culture.

Chapter 5 examines the exile forced on Benjamin by Nazi Germany to Paris, the center of his research on nineteenth-century modernism. The shift was theological as well as geographical—from a focus on Protestant theology in Benjamin's study of German seventeenth-century drama to the Catholic context of Baudelaire and the surrealists. Catholic and Protestant theologians counted among Benjamin's friends during these years, particularly Karl Thieme and Fritz Lieb, who shared his literary and political inclinations. Benjamin's late works in exile reflected his interests in apocalyptic tradition, religious practices, and German literary culture. Though the Second World War itself lies beyond the scope of this project, this chapter surveys religious life in France, Germany, and several of the places Benjamin visited during the

1930s. In the aftermath of World War I and in relation to Nazi power, religion around Benjamin during this period reflected violence and danger more than the lively discussion of previous years.

Each chapter correlates Benjamin's life and work with the religious world around him. Though he was Jewish, Benjamin knew more about Christianity than about Judaism. And like most German thinkers then and now, he paid more attention to religious thought than religious life. But when he did comment on religious life, he was usually original, suggestive, and insightful. I hope this investigation of religion around Benjamin sheds critical light on his work, his world, and ongoing conversations about religious life and tradition.