

Approaching the Others of German Studies from a pre-Holocaust Perspective: Catholics, Protestants, Yiddish, and Leonard Nimoy

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My talk is rooted in the challenges that any premodernist faces when teaching Germanophone literature and culture of the “First Reich,” i.e., the Holy Roman Empire, which endured from the pope’s crowning of Charlemagne on Christmas Day 800 to Napoleon’s toppling of the decrepit empire in 1806. The incipient Protestant Reformation of 1517 ushered in not only a pluralization of Christian denominations, but also a polarization of the empire’s faith-based culture and politics, one which, among other more minor matters, gave Protestants greater cause than Catholics to vote for the National Socialist “List 1” in the 1932-33 *Reichstag* elections.¹

Both Catholics and Protestants “othered” Jews, of course, and not just in Germany. “Approaching the Others of German Studies from a pre-Holocaust Perspective” focuses on my recent efforts in our departmental course on “German Cultural History” to “un-other” Jews for German minors and majors at the University of Iowa. I had originally planned to approach this topic from a more academic perspective, namely by examining how the humanistic *ad fontes* approach to both the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Greek of the New Testament initially allowed the pope in 1516 to acquit Johannes Reuchlin, a prominent classical philologist and scholar of Roman law, of charges of heresy for Reuchlin’s impassioned defense of Kabbalistic writings alongside the Torah and the Talmud against the efforts of Inquisitors to burn all Jewish books in the Holy Roman Empire.² Instead, I have chosen to extend my historic contextualization back even further, covering the Jewish migration to Central Europe in the 3rd Century C.E., the medieval development of Yiddish in the German Rhineland region, the subsequent expulsion of Jews from the Rhineland and their migration to Eastern Europe. That overview culminates with a video of a Yiddish speaker with which most students are well familiar.

¹ Gary King et al., “Ordinary Voting Behavior in the Extraordinary Election of Adolf Hitler,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69 (2008): 951-96.

² David H. Price, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).