



Opening Ceremony of the
North Gate Building to Be
Used as the European Cen-
ter for Jewish Scholarship
on August 18, 2021

Welcome Address by the Pres-
ident of the University of
Potsdam

- Check against delivery -

With the introduction of Jewish Theology as a regular academic subject, the University of Potsdam entered unknown territory in 2013 – constitutionally, academically, and historically. Today, there are many people who have contributed to this success story. But that was not always the case: In a largely secular federal state like Brandenburg, the idea of a theological faculty initially did not fall on fertile ground everywhere. It is thanks to Walter Homolka and his allies that this idea became a reality – here in Brandenburg, in Potsdam, the cradle of the Enlightenment.

Personally, I have also been skeptical of the concept of theological faculties – regardless of their denomination – for many decades. Not just because I am not religious myself. But also from a systemic point of view. “What need is there for theologies at a university?”, I asked myself. In a place whose essence is in secular research and teaching, the search for what holds the world together at its core.

Above all, it was the project of introducing a School of Jewish Theology, which I got involved in shortly after taking office in 2012, that changed my mind. This certainly has to do with the political and moral message that this monumental project sent out – a clear signal against antisemitism, a clear signal for open-mindedness and tolerance. But I have since also come to have a different view of the role that theologies can – and should – play, especially at inherently secular universities.

By now, I am indeed of the opinion that the central place of theologies should be the public higher education system – the *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, in which the interest of state and society in terms of culture and integration policy as well as the epistemological interest of science and academia intertwine and multi-layered dialogs between secular and confessional intellectual discourse become possible. The physical and intellectual coexistence on university campuses of the theologies, on the one hand, and the secular disciplines, on the other, creates opportunities for dialog, including controversial debate, and thus for mutual understanding – opportunities that would not exist if the education of clergy took place only in Christian seminaries, Talmudic colleges, and Koranic schools far removed from universities. It is through teaching and learning together on a shared academic campus that opportunities for conversation and mutual understanding come to be. This is an effective way to prevent the catastrophes that can arise when one not only does not understand those with a different faith or no faith, but also does not respect them, does not accept them in their otherness, and ultimately fights them with violence. In this context, I have to mention the current situation in Afghanistan.

Our Jewish Theology in Potsdam is therefore the modern academic answer to the question of the “right” location of confessional scholarship, for which enlightened Judaism has fought since the 19th century. With the inclusion of Jewish Theology in the spectrum of subjects of a public university, a process is completed for enlightened Judaism that was – to quote a scholar of state-church law, Hans Michael Heinig – “initially neglected in the civil process of emancipation of the Jews [...] and then basically blocked for a long time by the Shoah.”

I will not conceal the fact that even after the agreement in principle of 2013, there was still a great need for clarification at the operational level, especially since there are still people that oppose the project of a Jewish Theology at a German university, even today. But all this did

not put the project in any serious jeopardy. And so we have succeeded in bringing together these three important and unique institutions – the Abraham Geiger College, the Zacharias Frankel College, and the School of Jewish Theology of the University of Potsdam – in one place and in accommodating them on our campus *Am Neuen Palais*.

For the University of Potsdam and our federal state, 2013 marked the beginning of an entirely new chapter. Today, the construction phase comes to a worthy conclusion with the institutions' move into this wonderful building and its use as the European Center for Jewish Scholarship. For me, this brings with it many hopes and opportunities. May there be a dialog on equal footing. May Jewish life continue to flourish in Germany. May religious and cultural plurality be universally recognized as diversity and as an enrichment of our society. I am looking forward to it.