BRILL

ARIES – JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY
OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM 16 (2016) 86–141

ARIES
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"Religion" and "Science" within a Global Religious History

*Michael Bergunder**
Heidelberg University
michael.bergunder@wts.uni-heidelberg.de

Abstract

The paper argues that the final forging of our current understanding of "religion" and "esotericism" did not take place before the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that it was a global endeavor right from the beginning. Previous research has not fully appreciated the new situation that arose because of scientific materialism and the challenge presented by conceptions of a general religious history. By focusing on the relationship of "religion" and "science" within a global religious history (*globale Religionsgeschichte*) from the late nineteenth century till today, the paper shows how "religion" and "esotericism" can be understood as constitutive parts of the same global history.

Keywords

religion – science – global history – postcolonialism – Buddhism – Hinduism – Islam – Protestantism

The modern history of "religion" remains largely unclear. This article will argue that our current understanding of religion first took root in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The crucial impetus for this was the rise of the natural sciences. They brought along with them a completely new plight for

* Translated from German by Sebastian Cuevas. I thank Andrea Gutierrez and Peter Forshaw for carefully editing the English and Julian Strube for constructive criticism of a previous version of this article.

Christianity, which was not comparable to the challenges of the eighteenth century or earlier.[1] A radical scientific materialism fundamentally criticized Christianity. As a reaction to this, liberal theology began to define Christianity as a "religion" and drew its clear division from science—removing its own claims for natural knowledge. Simultaneously, the inclusion of Christianity in general religious history followed. These processes led to a new inward understanding of religion that has shaped the modern self-understanding of Christianity. However, this is not the whole story.

This new understanding of religion also spread rapidly outside Europe and North America through colonialism, and there it was received and transformed. It found its way into the major nineteenth-century Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim reform movements, which then also started portraying their own traditions decidedly as "religions". This, in turn, had an influence on the discourse on religion in Europe and North America; hence a global perspective is necessary to understand those processes.

Moreover, the establishment of a demarcation line between "science" and "religion" was from the very beginning followed by simultaneous attempts to reunite "religion" with "science" again. This also happened on a global level. The decisive role that esoteric movements played in the conceptual establishment of this discourse attempting to fuse "religion" and "science" at the time when they were just separating is often overlooked. I argue that today's understanding of both "religion" and "esotericism" has originated within a global framework since the late nineteenth century. So far, the study of esotericism has hardly addressed this aspect, which also relates to the problem that the very understanding of esotericism remains contested.

This article proposes a historical approach to the definition of esotericism that considers its global entanglement with religion.[2] Such a definition considers the current everyday understanding of esotericism as its starting point. Esotericism today is a global phenomenon, and there is a broad consensus in academic research that today's understanding of esotericism reaches back to crucial developments in the late nineteenth century. The Theosophical Society and related currents were especially significant in that process. Wouter Hanegraaff considers theosophy 'the most influential esoteric movement of the nineteenth century ... that created essential foundations for much of twentieth-century esotericism'.[3] By any measure, the Theosophical Society and the many

1 Harrison, 'Science', 86, 89.
2 Bergunder, 'Esotericism'.
3 Hanegraaff, 'Esotericism', 130–131.

groups and sympathizers related to it can only be properly described as a global phenomenon. As has been discussed elsewhere,[4] it is therefore puzzling why current academic research on esotericism labels its subject matter "western" and characterizes it as 'as an inherently Western domain of research'.[5] Critics who question the adjective "western" have received little support so far.[6] Replacing the notion of "western esotericism" with a global one most likely requires another fundamental discussion about the very concept of esotericism. From my point of view, understanding esotericism as a historical object and examining it from a global historical perspective is a viable solution.

This article argues that "religion" and "esotericism", which took shape in the late nineteenth century, need to be investigated as global and mutually related phenomena. The historiography of "religion" for Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism has tended to ignore any esoteric impact, and the historiography of "esotericism" has usually considered it a "western" alternative movement. In what follows, I suggest an alternative historiographical narrative that might help to overcome this previous one-sidedness. I show how "religion" and "esotericism" can be understood as constitutive parts of the same global history by focusing on the relationship of "religion" and "science" within a global religious history (*globale Religionsgeschichte*) from the late nineteenth century till today.

1 Scientific Materialism as Criticism of Christianity

The balance of power in scientific discourse shifted permanently in the nineteenth century. The natural sciences were separated from the philosophical faculties and received preferential sponsorship both from public and private sources. Scientific research began deciphering hitherto unsolved mysteries of nature with staggering speed. Emboldened by a monumental epistemological optimism and the new social prestige of their profession, many scientists voiced claims that the world in its totality could be explained through scientific methods. This led to an intense discussion between Christianity and science in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

One of the first to initiate the debate in Germany was Karl Vogt (1817–1895), professor of zoology at the University of Gießen. Vogt voiced a radical

4 Bergunder, 'Gandhi', 402–404.

5 Hanegraaff, 'Esotericism', 15.

6 Stuckrad, 'Esotericism'; Asprem, 'Beyond'; Granholm, 'Locating'.

materialism through his *Physiologische Briefe* (Physiological Letters) from 1845 to 1847, which contained this famous and widely quoted statement:

> Each and every scientist whose thinking is logically consistent will, I think, adopt this notion: That all those capabilities, which we think of as spiritual, are merely functions of the cerebral matter; or, to express myself bluntly: that thoughts have the same relationship to the brain as bile has to the liver or urine to the kidneys.[7]

No less important were the contributions of Jakob Moleschott (1822–1893), adjunct professor for physiology at Heidelberg. Moleschott wrote the book *Der Kreislauf des Lebens* (The Circuit of Life), which by 1887 had seen five editions. His radical materialistic understanding of life echoes that of Vogt:

> Man is the sum of parents and nurse, time and place, air and weather, sound and light, diet and attire. His will is the unavoidable consequence of all those causes and is bound to a natural law recognizable by its manifestation, such as the planet on its orbit or the plants on the ground.[8]

The conflict escalated into the so-called 'materialism debate' (*Materialismusstreit*) in 1854.[9] That year, Göttingen physiologist Rudolf Wagner (1805–1864) held a presentation at the 31st Convention of the Society of German Scientists and Doctors in Göttingen, in which he defended Christianity as the spiritual foundation of science and flouted every kind of materialistic tendency.[10] He expressly criticized Karl Vogt, who published his own defense against Wagner's attacks one year later. It was titled *Köhlerglaube und Wissenschaft* (Gießen 1855), which roughly translates as 'blind faith and science'. It was probably 'one of the rudest polemical efforts in the history of science that made the severity of the struggle unusual'.[11] Vogt toured Europe as a popular itinerant speaker, which guaranteed that his theories attained a certain prominence.

Beside Vogt, Ludwig Büchner (1824–1899, brother of Georg Büchner) also became involved in the materialism debate. In 1855, he published his book *Kraft*

7 Vogt, *Briefe*, 323.

8 Moleschott, *Kreislauf*, 436.

9 Messer, *Geschichte*, 40–45; Bröker, *Motive*, 12–42; Chadwick, *Church*, 161–188; Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung*, 295–299.

10 Wagner, 'Menschenschöpfung', 15–22.

11 Bröker, *Motive*, 32.

und Stoff (Force and Matter), of which there were twenty-one editions by 1904 and which was translated into fifteen languages.[12] Büchner took on, similar to Vogt, extensive public speaking activities. For example, he spoke on a tour of the United States at about a hundred events in thirty-two different states. The core thesis of *Kraft und Stoff* was: 'No force without matter, no matter without force!'[13]

> A spirit without a body is just as unthinkable as electricity or magnetism without those metals or materials that make these forces active and visible.[14]

He considered the soul the 'product of an odd composition of matter',[15] which could therefore not continue living after death. The law of the conservation of matter dictated that matter has always existed, leaving no room for creation. Given that science accepts no supernatural causes, belief in the transcendental had to be abandoned.

From the very beginning, scientifically oriented materialism in Germany was not only a purely epistemological issue but also a political one. Many of its exponents backed the Revolution of 1848. These people lost their status and occupation in the wake of the ensuing restoration and in many cases had to flee to neighboring countries. Their materialism was also conceived of as criticism launched toward the church, which served the interests of a monarchy flanked by the nobility and the bourgeoisie. The Prussian school and university systems, for example, fell under the virtual total control of these conservative-reactionary circles after 1848.[16] Even though most professional scientists did not adopt this kind of materialism, the topic gained considerably wide appeal through a popular scientific discourse.[17] The discourse intensified after 1859 following the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. The inclusion of the Darwinian idea of evolution turned materialism into an all-encompassing theory of the natural evolution of all life, including human, and immensely elevated its ideological vigor to a debate that had acquired an ideological dimension.[18] A clash of worldviews developed out of the materialism

12 Chadwick, *Secularization*, 171–175; Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung*, 296.
13 Büchner, *Kraft*, 2.
14 Büchner, *Kraft*, 192.
15 Büchner, *Kraft*, 144.
16 Ziegler, *Strömungen*, 295–315.
17 Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung*, 299.
18 Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung*, 300.

debate, which aimed to replace the church and Christianity with a scientifically based alternative. David Friedrich Strauß (1808–1874), known to posterity mostly for his book *Das Leben Jesu* (The Life of Jesus), published his most successful and popular work in 1872, two years before his death. The title of the book was *Der alte und der neue Glaube* (The Old and the New Faith) and it had seen fouteen editions by 1888.[19] Numerous translations followed: the first English language edition appeared in 1873, the French in 1876. Strauß drafted a 'new faith' founded on the theory of evolution. Modern scientific perception understood the world as originating in an unbroken chain of causality, which left no place for God's actions. God had become 'homeless'.[20] The new faith proposed by Strauß is a moral doctrine shaped by aesthetic aspects, which amounted to the development of a pure Humanism from Christianity. This shows how much the future of Christianity itself was at stake in this debate.

Even more aggressive and influential was Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), the Darwinian zoologist and professor at the University of Jena. He proposed a monism based on the concept of the 'unity of nature' and attempted to bridge the cleft between religion and science from a scientific perspective.[21] His most successful work, *Die Welträthsel* (The Riddles of the World), was published in 1899 and by 1914 had been re-edited twenty-one times, with 300,000 copies printed, and translated into twenty-four languages.[22] 'Faith in the supernatural' should be replaced by the 'natural', meaning that true revelations—in other words, the true source of rational knowledge—are only to be found in nature.[23] Haeckel considered the unity of that which is—which comprises neither standalone immaterial entities (for example, souls) nor standalone immaterial causes (for example, God)—to be safeguarded by the laws of development and of substance (which include the chemical law of the conservation of matter and the physical law of the conservation of energy). Haeckel propagated a 'monistic religion' founded on science and consisting in the cult of the 'trinity of the true, the good, and the beautiful'.[24] It was meant to wholly supersede the allegedly irrational Christian faith.

Such anti-Christian and anticlerical worldviews invoking science were numerous in the second half of the nineteenth century. Despite the accusations of dilettantism coming from established scholars of philosophy, this vitriolic

19 Graf, 'Faith', 223–245.
20 Strauß, *Glaube*, 30.
21 Ohst. 'Haeckel'.
22 Messer, *Geschichte*, 92.
23 Haeckel, *Welträthsel*, 348, 354.
24 Haeckel, *Welträthsel*, 388, 462.

criticism of the church and Christianity was highly successful among the different strata of society. According to the observations of Theobald Ziegler, a contemporary at the end of the nineteenth century, this kind of scientific materialism found its greatest resonance among 'many naturalists' and a 'number of the half-educated'—that is, among the lower middle classes and in parts of the liberally minded educated classes.[25]

The degree to which these movements were organized varied. Societies such as Haeckel's 'Monistenbund' (Monist Union) were common. The many freethinkers' associations likewise deserve special mention. The first significant establishment of such an association in Germany—actually an offshoot of a French group established the previous year—occurred in 1881 through the decisive contribution of the already mentioned Ludwig Büchner. The Social Democrats, many of whom considered Haeckel's *Die Welträthsel* a 'blissful devotional book',[26] offered these associations an institutionally established platform for their propagation.

The debate in Germany was closely followed in the Anglo-Saxon world, though scientists there seldom opened such radical fronts. Nevertheless, there were also influential voices that postulated the incompatibility of science and religion and acrimoniously attacked theology. One of them belonged to Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) who spearheaded Darwinism in Great Britain. He, for example, wrote in the *Westminster Review* in 1860: 'Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules'.[27] The most strident polarizer in Great Britain was considered to be the physicist and glaciologist John Tyndall (1820–1893), otherwise known as the 'hammer of theology',[28] who, similar to Huxley, achieved great success as a public speaker and furthered the popularization of science. One of his most widely known lectures was the one held at the annual conference of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Belfast in 1874, in which he claimed:

> All religious theories, schemes and systems, which embrace notions of cosmogony, or which otherwise reach into the domain of science, must, *in so far as they do this*, submit to the control of science, and relinquish all thought of controlling it.[29]

25 Ziegler, *Strömungen*, 339.
26 Messer, *Geschichte*, 99.
27 Huxley (1860), quoted after Chadwick, *Church*, 12.
28 Chadwick, *Church*, 12.
29 Tyndall, *Address*, 61.

He also vehemently defended evolutionist scientific theories based on the idea that life originated from matter.[30] Among the educated classes of the time, the lecture held by Tyndall in Belfast became a symbol of the epistemological optimism of the sciences and their animosity toward Christianity and Christian theology.[31] Four years later, a friend of Tyndall's, the biologist and physicist George Romanes, published *A Candid Examination of Theism* (1878, with four editions by 1913) under a pseudonym. In this book, he defended the opinion that scientific rationalism was impossible to combine with belief in God.[32] There was a popular category of literature on science inspired by this discussion, which tried to situate the conflict between science and religion within a larger historical context. It includes for example John William Draper's *A History of the Conflict between Science and Religion* (1875, twenty-three editions by 1901, translations into German and French), and Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science With Theology in Christendom* (1896, several editions and translations into German and French). Such voices established a popular discourse on science in the Anglo-Saxon world, which described an inherent and eternal hostility between science and Christianity.

This heated popular debate forced both the scientific establishment and academic Christian theology to reevaluate their positions. Subsequently, the academic scientific establishment curtailed its claims on knowledge. Following this lead, liberal Christian theology propagated a retreat from all-encompassing explanations of the world and defined Christianity through an inward concept of religion. This will be more precisely explained below. However, Christianity did not only face the challenge posed by science. It simultaneously had to position itself within a new rising general religious history. Furthermore, these reevaluations of Christianity took place as part of a global exchange process. These two latter aspects also require further elucidation.

2 The New Self-Restraint of Science

The materialism debate which initiated the clash between science and Christianity took place at a time of crisis in German philosophy.[33] This crisis was overcome through the rise of Neo-Kantianism in the 1860s. In 1866, Friedrich Albert Lange (1828–1875) wrote his two-volume *Geschichte des Materialismus*

30 Tyndall, *Address*, 55–56.
31 Chadwick, *Church*, 13; Livingston, 'Science', 13–16.
32 Chadwick, *Church*, 21–23; Turner, *Religion*, 134–163.
33 Ziegler, *Strömungen*, 322.

und Kritik seiner Bedeutung für die Gegenwart (History of Materialism and Critique of its Meaning in our Times). He accepted materialism as a necessary scientific method, but contested the notion—with recourse to Kant's critical epistemology—that only matter and force can disclose the absolute truth to us. This laid down the default strategy through which Neo-Kantianism, the leading school of philosophical thought for subsequent decades, could rebuke the materialist claims for unlimited knowledge by means of critical epistemology. Consequently, this development in academic philosophy deeply influenced science's self-understanding due to its firm rejection of any materialist claim to explain the world in totality.

The majority of the scientific establishment was not interested in polemic animosities directed toward Christian theology and the church. It was not Haeckel who determined the dominant scientists' attitude toward Christianity, but rather Emil Du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896) and Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894), the latter being particularly influenced by Neo-Kantianism.[34] Two lectures by du Bois-Reymond were programmatic. The first one was held at the 45th Convention of the Society of German Scientists and Doctors in Leipzig in 1872, and it was about the 'limits of natural knowledge'. In this lecture, he administered a very clear rejection to the unrestricted epistemological optimism of science when dealing with the question of the relation between force and matter, and between mind and substance. During a speech in front of the Prussian Academy of Sciences a few years later in 1880, he spoke of the 'seven mysteries of the world' and argued with clear animosity toward Haeckel that the 'existence of matter and force', the 'source of movement', the 'emergence of the simplest sensations', as well as the very question of 'free will' represented transcendental, in other words, unsolvable problems (*ignorabimus*).

Du Bois-Reymond, however, adopted thoroughly materialistic positions when addressing other issues. He did not see the 'origin of life' as an unsolvable mystery, since for him life represented merely an animated condition of matter. In view of the Darwinian theory of natural selection, he rejected the idea of 'a purposeful and providential construction of nature', which could not be explained through the causal laws of nature. He also did not think it impossible to trace 'rational thinking' and 'the origin of language, both closely connected' back to sensory perception.[35] Du Bois-Reymond represented a materialistically informed 'cautious agnosticism'[36] containing no explicit anti-Christian

34 Ziegler, *Strömungen*, 338; Köhnke, *Neukantianismus*, 415; Vidoni, *Ignorabimus*.

35 du Bois-Reymond, *Welträtsel*.

36 Nipperdey, *Religion*, 129.

elements. This, according to historian Thomas Nipperdey, characterized the zeitgeist of the German scientific establishment of the era:

> The consensus among the majority of academics was that the new epistemology of Neo-Kantianism keenly established the right of science and its separation from ethics (and religion) and thus favored agnosticism.[37]

This characterization pertains not only to the situation in Germany but also in the Anglo-Saxon world. Ultimately, this tendency can be found even in Huxley, a rather radical critic of Christianity. He coined the term "agnostic" to say, borrowing from Hume and Kant, that although he himself viewed religion and metaphysics as unsolvable questions, he was also not interested in pursuing them further.[38]

3 A New Global Understanding of "Religion" at the End of the Nineteenth Century

Materialism and the associated clash of worldviews dramatically challenged Christianity. Liberal Protestant theologians in Europe and North America reacted to this by positively receiving the new scientific self-restraint in the spirit of Neo-Kantianism and agnosticism, and by themselves restraining their aspirations to explain the world. Liberal Protestant theology stood for a clear demarcation between the domains of science and religion. As justification, Christianity was declared an inward "religion" that belonged to the spiritual world. However, the reevaluation of religion within liberal Protestant theology did not occur merely as an answer to scientific materialism. It was also brought forward to meet the challenge of a newly developing conception of general religious history. In addressing both these challenges, a new understanding of religion developed. Previous research has not fully appreciated this historical turning point in the history of "religion". In order to make a solid case, the next section will address the current scholarly discussion on the historicisation of "religion". Even less known in religious studies is the paradigm shift in liberal Protestant theology in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; hence it is necessary to go deeper into the respective theological debates to show how this all happened. The most influential German representatives of liberal theology

37 Nipperdey, *Religion*, 129.

38 Lightman, *Agnosticism*.

that were also widely read in British and North American Protestantism at the time will be presented with their thoughts on that matter, namely, Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Herrmann, Martin Rade, and Ernst Troeltsch. Then I address the British and North American situation. The sources make very clear that liberal theology itself saw its rise as a turning point. It should be added, furthermore, that the reevaluation of religion occurred within the context of a global process of exchange, an aspect that likewise deserves to be examined in more detail later.

3.1 *The Historicization of* "Religion"

The historicization of "religion" remains an unresolved question in the academic discipline dedicated to its study.[39] The historical origins of today's understanding of "religion" are often vaguely traced back to the seventeenth century or even earlier.[40] Ernst Feil first managed to bring some clarity to the topic with his four-volume magnum opus *Religio* (Göttingen 1986–2007). He concluded that the word "religion" (Lat. *religio*) in European philosophy and theology from antiquity to the eighteenth century represented primarily a concept encompassing a certain procedure. This concept of religion designated 'the scrupulous diligence ..., to carry out those acts that were owed to a God (as a superior) because of the cardinal virtue of "*justitia*".'[41] In addition to that, Feil identified less specific usages of religion, for example as a synonym for the four 'laws' (Lat. *lex*) or 'sects' (Lat. *secta*) of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Heathens. It was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that a 'significant break'[42] occurred which led to a new understanding of religion as a 'modern basic concept' (neuzeitlicher Grundbegriff):

> The then-newly constituted "religion" from the second half of the eighteenth century can be characterized as an "inner religion" which did not exist before.[43]

According to Feil, 'perhaps [the] most important evolvement' regarding this new 'inner religion' was attained by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834).[44]

39 Bergunder, 'Gandhi'.
40 Smith, *Meaning*; Harrison, *Enlightenment*; McCutcheon, *Manufacturing*; Dubuisson, *Construction*; Stroumsa, *Science*.
41 Feil, *Religio*, IV.14.
42 Feil, *Religio*, IV.12.
43 Feil, *Religio*, IV.883.
44 Feil, *Religio*, IV.880, 756–801.

In his talks *Über die Religion* (On Religion) from 1799, Schleiermacher defined religion as 'sense and taste of the infinite'.[45] Religion, in its essence, was seen 'neither as thinking nor acting', but rather as 'intuition and sensation'[46] or 'as contemplation of the universe'.[47] 'Sensation' and 'intuition' are intertwined moments of the same circumstance, 'originally one and indivisible'.[48] Religion became something that everybody can and has to discover from within: 'You will find yourself in you'.[49] Religion received a new inward location. As a result, it could manifest in many different external ways of observance and institutionalisation, 'each of which had at the same time an individual and purely arbitrary conception of the universe as centerpiece of their whole religion'.[50] As a result, Schleiermacher considered all positive religious communities secondary and external expressions of the same religious experience.[51]

Ernst Feil convincingly argued that this concept of an "inner religion" is a new idea. His findings represent, without a doubt, a milestone on the road toward the historicization of religion. Nevertheless, Feil ended his historical examination in the beginning of the nineteenth century. He admitted his desire for a 'continuation of the research into the history of the concept through the nineteenth and, if possible, twentieth centuries',[52] although he evidently did not expect any modification to take place during that time. For Feil it was clear without further historical investigation that the concept of the "inner religion", authoritatively formulated by Schleiermacher, was identical to the "modern-Protestant" concept of religion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[53] This wholesale judgement did not originate from Ernst Feil the historian but from Ernst Feil the Catholic theologian, who, on dogmatic grounds, criticized the Protestant understanding of religion, which discarded "faith", a central dogma of Catholicism.[54]

In light of the material presented in this paper, Feil's generalizing view on the nineteenth century needs to be questioned since it overlooks the new caesura in the understanding of religion at the end of the century. William Cantwell

45 Schleiermacher, *Religion*, 80.
46 Schleiermacher, *Religion*, 79.
47 Schleiermacher, *Religion*, 81.
48 Schleiermacher, *Religion*, 89. Feil, *Religio*, IV.762–764.
49 Schleiermacher, *Religion*, 100.
50 Schleiermacher, *Religion*, 171.
51 Schleiermacher, *Religion*, 170–176.
52 Feil, *Religio*, IV.889.
53 Feil, *Streitfall*, 5, 22, 25.
54 Feil, 'Problematik'; Bergunder, 'Gandhi', 257–259.

Smith had already indicated that the final formulation of today's understanding of religion occurred 'in the decades before and after 1900'.[55] This was exactly the time during which liberal Protestantism developed its new understanding of Christianity as a religion, which had to justify the separation between science and Christianity and to answer the challenge of general religious history. Previous discussions in religious studies have neglected the widespread consensus of an idea among church history and systematic theology—that Protestant theology experienced a new beginning and reorientation at the end of the nineteenth century.[56] It also directly affected the emerging religious studies, as a closer examination of Max Müller's and William James' work will show.

Although most of the authors from this period do refer in varying extents to the older Schleiermacher, both their context and their concept of religion were decisively different as they saw religion firmly within the new dichotomy of nature and spirit, the conflict of Christianity and science and a general religious history. Moreover, these conceptual reorientations did not only concern liberal theology and the emerging religious studies in Europe and North America, but happened globally. This marks a further aspect that accentuates the newness of the situation, which also remains to be looked into in greater detail.

3.2 *A New Theological Understanding of "Religion" Addressing the Challenge of Science*

The new Protestant understanding of Christianity as a "religion" attempted to entrench Christianity within the domains of the spiritual, while systematically withdrawing it from the realm of science. It started in Germany with Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He based his theology on the autonomy of the human spirit against nature:[57]

> For we do not exercise religious inquiry merely to explain nature out of a primordial cause but always and exclusively to explain the autonomy of the human spirit against nature.[58]

Religion enables the human being to assert this autonomy in the face of nature. 'Religion' is the 'belief in noble spiritual powers which complement man's own strength or elevate it to a particular whole to match the pressure applied by

55 Smith, *Meaning*, 47.

56 Heussi, *Kompendium*, 471–475 [§121]; Nowak, *Geschichte*, 161–163; Wagner, *Religion*, 107–153.

57 Wagner, *Religion*, 107–116.

58 Ritschl, *Lehre*, 208. Wagner, *Religion*, 112.

nature'.[59] For Ritschl, it was crucial 'that religion and the theoretical knowledge of the world represent two different mental functions, and, when applied to the same object, they would not overlap but altogether diverge'.[60] He concluded that a clear separation of Christianity and science regarding the concept of religion was possible:

> Collisions between religion and science are the exclusive product of the extolling of laws pertaining to the immediate areas of nature or spirit into universal laws and their subsequent application as key to a general view on reality. However, this procedure represents nothing more than the amalgamation of an apocryphal religious interest with scientific research, which has no claims to the rights of the latter. The settlement of the conflict between faith and science depends on this insight.[61]

There is only conflict when both perspectives are improperly intermingled. 'Materialism' caused such a 'collision' from the scientific side, while 'pantheism' caused it from the religious side.[62] Avoiding these amalgamations means avoiding the conflict 'between faith and science'.

A clear differentiation between religion and science was also constitutive for the thinking of Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922).[63] Just how important the issue of scientific materialism was for him becomes clear from his article titled *Religion und Sozialdemokratie* (Religion and Social Democracy) from 1891. For Herrmann, the Social Democrats propagated 'the scientific method of obtaining knowledge, its rendering onto the area of historical life and thus its development into a naturalist worldview', eventually aiming to successfully spread this view 'among our nation'.[64] Herrmann emphazised how widespread materialist worldviews were at the time: 'The majority of the well-educated who are, if at all, still deeply concerned over the conflict between knowledge of nature and moral or religious conviction' had 'capitulated to naturalism'.[65] The church did not react to this and gave the impression of 'being afraid' and 'scared of the truth'.[66] Equally, many 'sober Christians' simply 'ignored the arguments

59 Ritschl, *Lehre*, 190.

60 Ritschl, *Lehre*, 185.

61 Ritschl, *Lehre*, 581.

62 Ritschl, *Lehre*, 197–201.

63 Wagner, *Religion*, 117–130.

64 Herrmann, 'Sozialdemokratie', 279.

65 Herrmann, 'Sozialdemokratie', 279.

66 Herrmann, 'Sozialdemokratie', 280.

that gave nature its right'.[67] Since this was not a solution, per Herrmann, one should realize that 'the Christian religion is only fortified when binding the faith in the living God with the recognition of the legitimacy and boundlessness of nature' as taught by science, given that the Christian religion has 'a very different foundation'.[68]

Similar to Ritschl, who influenced him significantly, Wilhelm Herrmann advocated the foundation of Christianity as religion by which he divested science of its grip:

> For science represents the knowledge of the objective or verifiable reality. Nevertheless, neither that which religion claims to be nor the reality it confides in is constituted in a way that could force others to see in it anything other than illusions. The knowledge on which religion can be based is obviously of a particular kind. It is not the assessment of objective reality but rather the consideration of that which we experience for ourselves.[69]

Perhaps it was justifiable in the Middle Ages not to separate religion and science 'when religion had not yet attained consciousness of its subjectivity, which rejects every objectification, and when there was no science detached from any consideration regarding the needs of individual life and focused solely on the mere ascertainment of that which is verifiably real'.[70] In Herrmann's day, anything other than a clear-cut division between the two would be an 'anachronism'.[71]

Herrmann understood the purpose and goal of religion as becoming the means through which humans could build a moral self that vanquished their dependence on nature and society.[72] He differed from Ritschl, who had assumed that the spirit possessed a prior autonomy, when he declared that the moral self had to earn its autonomy.[73] Regardless of this difference, both saw religion as the means to separation from science, and put it in a very similar position.

67 Herrmann, 'Sozialdemokratie', 282.
68 Herrmann, 'Sozialdemokratie', 282.
69 Herrmann, 'Religion', 509, 593.
70 Herrmann, 'Religion', 592.
71 Herrmann, 'Religion', 592.
72 Wagner, *Religion*, 120–121.
73 Wagner, *Religion*, 120–123.

The new theological approach becomes particularly plain and clear in Martin Rade's text *Die Religion im modernen Geistesleben* (Religion in Modern Spiritual Life) from 1898.[74] Rade (1857–1940) also emphasized the gravity of the challenge posed by science:

> The event brought upon the spiritual realm by our nineteenth century is the advent of the exact sciences. Modern science constitutes the modern man.[75]

This is the context within which, according to Rade, the animosity between science and religion first surfaced:

> The conflict exists. It burns in the souls of many. It resonates in popular assemblies, in societies, and in newspapers. Both sides, the scientific faction and the religious communities, are fostering the enmity.[76]

Rade saw the causes of the conflict merely in the 'transgression of boundaries' by both parties. He stressed that science had increasingly got second thoughts about its own borders too:

> I would like to ... expressly recognize that the appointed representatives of the natural sciences of today, through the tremendous cautiousness of their research and their judgement, are much more wary of transgressing the boundaries than their predecessors.[77]

He thought that, just 'like the most modern scientific research on nature today', 'theology, the science of religion should also be capable of a similar self-criticism'.[78] This way the conflict could be stripped of its foundation: 'Religion and science, when seen accurately, cannot come into conflict'.[79] Both have different subject matters. Science deals with the world of natural phenomena and religion with the spiritual realm. Religious expressions and imagery do not make reference to the visible objects of the natural world. Science applies the concept of causality (why?), while religion rests on the concept of purpose

74 Rade, *Religion*.
75 Rade, *Religion*, 20.
76 Rade, *Religion*, 26.
77 Rade, *Religion*, 37.
78 Rade, *Religion*, 38.
79 Rade, *Religion*, 21.

(what for?).[80] Rade concluded that both were 'predestined for a peaceful coexistence, a mutual supplementation'. Conflicts would only arise when a 'transgression of boundaries' took place.[81]

Liberal Protestant theology reached its pinnacle at the turn of the century through the works of Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923). Troeltsch also established that 'science appears to many as the actual enemy'[82] of Christianity, and pointed out that the difference between the natural and spiritual realms, together with the independence of the latter, did not allow the conflict between science and Christianity:

> The attempts to subject spiritual life to the laws of nature have only shown that the former has its own, albeit very unique, legality and effect, which not in the least coincides with nature. ... Whether the spiritual world with its oughts and cultural values should be seen as self-sufficient and self-powered with respect to nature is therefore the question that we should ask in the face of science, while otherwise letting science continue peacefully on its path, which no student of the humanities (Geisteswissenschaften) can keep track of.[83]

For Troeltsch, Christianity, as a 'religion', was 'a forever mysterious and incommensurable principle of spiritual life, which cannot be dissolved further'.[84] Troeltsch conceived of an inward religion characterized 'through the movement of the divine working in a mysterious way in the unconscious depths of the uniform human mind'.[85] Similar to Rade, he saw no conflict between science and religion as long as the categorical difference between nature and spirit was observed. Troeltsch wrote this in 1897, almost at the same time as Rade. Like Rade, he also expressly referred to the self-restraint in the contemporary scientific establishment with regard to spiritual issues as already occurring:

> The answer of all scientists of actual importance to this question (the fundamental difference between nature and spirit) is affirmative, regardless of how different their exact views on this relationship may be.[86]

80 Rade, *Religion*, 21–26.
81 Rade, *Religion*, 26.
82 Troeltsch, 'Religionsgeschichte', 331.
83 Troeltsch, 'Religionsgeschichte', 332–333.
84 Troeltsch, 'Religionsgeschichte', 344.
85 Troeltsch, 'Religionsgeschichte', 340.
86 Troeltsch, 'Religionsgeschichte', 333.

This liberal Protestant reevaluation of religion from the end of the nineteenth century was not limited to Germany but equally took place in Great Britain and the United States. When looking at Great Britain, reference can be made to the Indologist and religious studies scholar Max Müller (1823–1900), who commented decidedly on theological issues and became an important voice of British liberal Protestantism too.[87] Müller is a fine example because he embodies the fluid transition between theological, philological and historical definitions of religion at the time. An explicit orientation toward an inward understanding of religion can be found in Müller's work from the 1880s onward. This was evidently related to an explicit perception of Kant, which caused Max Müller to produce a new English-language translation of the *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason) in the year 1881. In subsequent years he dedicated himself to fundamental questions of epistemology, and as a result published a work on the general philosophy of language in 1887. He understood Kant's epistemology as the link between 'materialism' and 'spiritualism' (*Spiritualismus*),[88] referring emphatically to Kant's idea that 'concepts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind'.[89] In his interpretation of Kant he felt supported by two German scientists. This was the already mentioned Hermann von Helmholtz,[90] who stood like no other for the new Neo-Kantian demarcation between a 'natural science' and 'spiritual science' (*Geisteswissenschaft*).[91] Müller also referred to Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) and his lecture held the previous year at the 59th Assembly of the Society of German Scientists and Doctors in Berlin.[92] Just like Helmholtz, Virchow stood for the clear self-restraint of science's claims to knowledge. Already in 1863 he had referred to the 'wise rules' postulated by Kant, which say that 'in everything there is a knowledge limit'.[93] Furthermore, Karl Vogt and Ernst Haeckel were also the objects of critical discussion in Müller's works.[94] All this shows that Max Müller was thoroughly current with the developments of the debate in Germany and oriented himself toward the clear division between nature and spirit prevalent there. He clearly addressed the scientific challenge to Christianity. This being the case, he expressly endorsed the concept of inner religion

87 Bosch, *Müller*, 380–391.
88 Müller, *Science*, 132.
89 Müller, *Science*, 143.
90 Müller, *Science*, 150–151.
91 Heidelberger, 'Helmholtz'.
92 Müller, *Science*, 151; Virchow, 'Anrede', 82.
93 Virchow (1863). Quoted after Zigman, 'Haeckel', 285.
94 Müller, *Science*, 152–163.

in his Gifford lectures, starting at the end of 1880s.[95] He understood religion as an 'experience' within the frame of scientific empiricism, since 'unless religion can be proved to be an experience, in the ordinary sense of that word ... it will always lack the solid foundation on which all our knowledge rests'.[96] Making reference to both his own philosophy of language and the works of Helmholtz, Müller distinguished between 'sensations' and 'perceptions'.[97] Sensations become conscious perceptions after they had been verbalized.[98] Perceptions were seen as 'definite', or, more precisely, 'finite'.[99] To think of the finite there must also be an 'infinite', that is to say, 'a Beyond'.[100] Explicitly referring to Schleiermacher, Müller equated the infinite with the notion of God.[101]

Müller did not just develop his understanding of religion out of the debate on science in Germany, but also through his grappling with British agnosticism as propagated by Huxley.[102] Müller countered the demur of the agnostics who saw God as "the Unknown" with the argument that this very statement correlated only to 'phenomenal knowledge', in other words, knowledge perceptible only through the senses.[103] Invoking Kant he contested the very notion that there could be purely phenomenal knowledge, for intuitions without concepts are blind. God is no sensibly perceptible object such as 'a stone, or a tree, or a dog'.[104] Nevertheless, the notion of the "infinite" is likewise necessarily connected to the mental ascertainment of sensations and represents an actual experience, albeit a mental one. Müller turned religion into an actual experience, which he located in the realm of the spiritual.

The debate in the United States was less defined than in Europe, but there were also influential voices in Christian theology that spoke up for a clear division of spheres between science and Christianity, based on the concept of Christianity as religion. The Methodist theologian Borden Parker Bowne (1847–1910), who taught at the University of Boston, reacted meticulously to the challenge. He characterized the already mentioned works of John William Draper or Andrew Dickson White, which described an alleged eternal historical

95 Müller, *Natural*.
96 Müller, *Natural*, 114.
97 Müller, *Natural*, 120–121, Müller, *Science*, 150–151.
98 Müller, *Natural*, 120–121.
99 Müller, *Natural*, 121–122.
100 Müller, *Natural*, 122–125.
101 Müller, *Natural*, 48, 52.
102 Müller, *Natural*, 70–72, 223–226.
103 Müller, *Natural*, 71.
104 Müller, *Natural*, 71.

conflict between science and Christianity, as beneficial 'lessons' for 'religion'.[105] Religion should learn from this that it had represented a 'false supernaturalism' for the longest time.[106] On the other hand, science should be encouraged to recognize its own 'limitations'.[107] If we observe both of these points, there would be no conflict between religion and science,[108] for there is a fundamental difference between 'the belief in law and natural order, on which science depends, and the belief in purpose, on which philosophy and religion insist'.[109] Similar to Martin Rade, for Bowne science worked with the concept of causality, and religion with the concept of purpose:

> They represent opposite aspects of the total problem, and both alike must be taken into account if we would seek mental rest and peace. And the two points of view must always be kept separate. When we are asking for the connection of events in the order of observed law, remarks about the purpose are irrelevant; and when we are asking for the meaning of events, it is idle to recite how they come about.[110]

Similar to the previously presented theological approaches, Bowne based his fundamental theological contemplations on a characterization of Christianity as a religion.[111] He made it clear that the 'the source of religion [lies] within the mind itself',[112] for 'knowledge is no longer something originating outside the mind, possibly in the nerves, and passed along ready-made into the mind; it is rather something built up by the mind within itself in accordance with principles immanent in the mental nature'.[113] With reference to Kant, whom he received mainly through Rudolf Hermann Lotze, Bowne declared that reason possessed 'ideals' which 'are produced, indeed, under the stress of experience, but they are not transcripts of any possible experience'.[114] They are 'purely a mental product', though this did not make them less real.[115]

105 Bowne, *Immanence*, 42–43.
106 Bowne, *Immanence*, 43.
107 Bowne, *Immanence*, 42–43.
108 Puls, *Theism*, 11.
109 Bowne 'Darwin', 131.
110 Bowne 'Darwin', 131, Puls, *Theism*, 36.
111 Bowne, *Philosophy*, 1–39.
112 Bowne, *Philosophy*, 2.
113 Bowne, *Theory*, iv.
114 Bowne, *Philosophy*, 20.
115 Bowne, *Philosophy*, 21.

Somewhat similar to Max Müller, and explicitly referring to Jacobi, Kant, and Schleiermacher, Bowne identified religion with the highest ideal of reason, which he described as 'perfection', as the 'supreme and complete', or as the 'ideal of ideals'.[116] It is noticeable, however, that Bowne's understanding of religion remains rather diffuse. Religion plays no role in his further theological considerations, in which he instead developed Christianity as 'theism'. This signals that, even for liberal theology in the United States, the issue of religion and its relationship to Christianity was at this time far from resolved. On the other hand, Bowne moved in the intellectual circles of Boston in which the new inward understanding of religion was explicitly championed. For several decades, Bowne was in close personal contact with William James (1842–1910),[117] professor at neighboring Harvard University. James defined religion both as 'a man's total reaction upon life'[118] and as 'the most important of all human functions'.[119] Religion was understood as 'a state of mind ... in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by the willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God'.[120] The departing point for religion is 'that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance'.[121] It essentially aimed at the experience of this spiritual universe because 'that union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end'.[122] James also makes very clear that the inward understanding of religion was a reaction to the challenge of science. For him, 'religion' consisted of 'facts', like science did, though these were not outwardly visible but were 'facts of personal experience'.[123]

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the strategy to demarcate clear boundaries between science and religion has become generally accepted both by liberal Protestant theology and by the academic scientific establishment.[124] Chadwick mentions that 'in 1900 men talked as though the conflict was over'.[125] A symbol of this development was Darwin's funeral at Westminster Abbey, where his coffin was carried by leading scientists—among them Thomas Henry

116 Bowne, *Philosophy*, 21.
117 Puls, *Theism*, 147–158.
118 James, *Varieties*, 35.
119 James, *Varieties*, 51.
120 James, *Varieties*, 47.
121 James, *Varieties*, 485.
122 James, *Varieties*, 485.
123 James, *Varieties*, 456.
124 Hübner, *Theologie*, 69–108; Gregory, *Impact*, 369–390.
125 Chadwick, *Church*, 35.

Huxley.[126] A clear demarcation between science and religion continues to define the prevalent self-understanding in liberal Protestant theology, and the 'amicable and peaceful coexistence'[127] propagated in this way remains the received view. Catholic theology did not subscribe to a separation of science and Catholicism in the nineteenth century but also achieved official "peace" with science through the publishing of the encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) and the Second Vatican Council.

3.3 *A New Theological Understanding of "Religion" in View of a General Religious History*

The focus on the scientific challenge easily overlooks another central problem faced by Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century. This was the challenge posed by a general religious history. Troeltsch even considered the conflict with science as less threatening:

> The modern discipline of history, which stretches far and wide over unknown times and latitudes, has also posed new problems for the Christian faith, and, among these problems, the establishment of a comparative religious history shook it most deeply. ... [Christianity is now seen as nothing more than] one of the largest world religions next to Islam and Buddhism, developing like its counterparts from a long past history and achieving the completion of a widely ramified historical formation. Where in all of this is its sole truth or even its dominant precedence?[128]

In the nineteenth century, Christianity faced its self-definition as a "religion", which Hans Kippenberg described as 'the discovery of religious history'.[129] Tomoko Masuzawa called it the 'invention of world religions'.[130] It was catalyzed by the rise of the new philologies. New texts were edited, originating from beyond Europe, that showed striking similarities to the Christian Bible and were often older than it. An impressive expression of this development was the fifty volume series *Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910), edited by Max Müller. Addressing Christianity as part of a general religious history seemed to be unavoidable. This situation was programmatically formulated by Friedrich Schiele in 1909 in his introduction to the first edition of *Religion in Geschichte*

126 Chadwick, *Church*, 28.
127 Hübner, *Welt*, 9.
128 Troeltsch, 'Religionsgeschichte', 333–334, 336.
129 Kippenberg, *Discovering*.
130 Masuzawa, *Invention*.

und Gegenwart (Religion in History and Present), a work that in a way represented the first summa of German liberal theology:

> The old, absolute separation between Christianity and non-revealed religions disappears, and new historical boundaries and relations take its place instead.[131]

According to Troeltsch 'the history of Christianity was through this irrevocably incorporated in general religious history'.[132] This judgement was reflected by all liberal theologians previously mentioned in this article. Martin Rade wrote: 'Modern man can and must be expected to understand religion first and foremost as a historical phenomenon'.[133] There were, nevertheless, different notions within the camp of liberal theology regarding the concrete role played by history in defining religion. Contrary to Troeltsch, Herrmann formulated substantial objections against religion being defined by 'comparative religious history'.[134] Regardless of this, he also saw religious history as a 'priceless means to enrich our understanding of religion',[135] and he integrated religious history into his own theological thinking on Christianity as a religion. Ritschl also addressed the problem in clear terms:

> The specific idiosyncrasy of Christianity, which has to be preserved in all aspects of theological knowledge, can only be transmitted after enlisting general religious history.[136]

For Great Britain, the case becomes particularly clear in Müller's works. As we have seen, Müller developed an inward understanding of religion with regard to the debate on science and religion. However, he was much more interested in integrating Christianity into general religious history. He equated religious history with an increasingly deeper understanding of the infinite which is natural religion.[137] Humans had first to discover the infinite, which he equated with God, in nature, and afterward in their fellow human beings. Eventually, this would lead to the 'discovery of oneness of the objective God

131 Schiele, 'Vorwort', IX. Wagner, *Religion*, 133.
132 Troeltsch, 'Religionsgeschichte', 336.
133 Rade, *Religion*, 9.
134 Herrmann, 'Religion', 591–592.
135 Herrmann, 'Religion', 592.
136 Ritschl, *Lehre*.
137 Müller, *Natural*, 126.

and the subjective Soul which forms the final consummation of all religion and philosophy'.[138] All existing positive religions, first and foremost Christianity, have the duty to rediscover within them this natural faith.

In the United States, Bowne's resort to the notion of religion was not only a reaction to the scientific challenge, but also expressly a reaction to the challenge presented by general religious history:

> The religious history of humanity is daily becoming better known ... we stand to-day in the face of vast religious systems of which our fathers never dreamed. Christianity has to confront historic religions, older and having more adherents than itself. ... Christ, then, is but one of many religious teachers.[139]

At that time, liberal Christian theology began understanding Christianity as one of many religions of the world. Claims to superiority were afterwards only made in this particular context, as ascertained in Troeltsch's works.[140] The implications of historical challenges to the reevaluation of religion within liberal Christian theology require further examination, which would push far beyond the boundaries and focus of this article. What will be considered in more detail in the following pages is the global dimension of religious discourse of the time.

3.4 *Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism as* "Religion"

The new understanding of "religion" in the late nineteenth century was by no means an issue exclusive to Europe and the United States. It was part of a complex process of global exchange.[141] Under the auspices of colonialism, many reform movements of considerable influence from North Africa to Asia consciously started to describe their own tradition as "religion". This was usually accompanied by an increasing 'rise of uniformity' (Bayly) which affected these traditions.[142] An important and often overlooked point is that the previously mentioned debates between science and Christianity played an important role in this process. Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists stressed the compatibility of their own religion with science, and emphasized the conflict Christianity was

138 Müller, *Theosophy*, viii.
139 Bowne, *Essence*, 4–5.
140 Troeltsch, *Absolutheit*.
141 Bayly, *Birth*; Beyer, *Religions*; Osterhammel, *Verwandlung*; Kollmar-Paulenz, 'Lamas'.
142 Bergunder 'Religion', 276–279.

facing. The following shows how this also led to a separation between science and religion with examples from the Asian context. The case of early Theravada reform Buddhism in Ceylon will show that this was not a necessary development, because this process did not occur there. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists integrated their religion into a general religious history. I will demonstrate how this occurred and finally argue for the persistence of these fundamental settings from around 1900 till today.

3.4.1 Hinduism

Hindu reform movements began to successfully propagate a uniform "Hinduism" in colonial India in the nineteenth century, and eventually, Hinduism was declared a religion.[143] This happened in reaction to colonial discourse. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that the idea that there is absolutely no contradiction between Hinduism and science was constitutive to almost all new outlines of Hinduism. Christianity was accused of being only to a very limited extent compatible with science. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the most important representative of this new understanding of 'Hinduism', explained to an American audience in 1894: 'Your Darwins, your Mills, your Humes have never received the endorsement of your [Christian] prelates'.[144]

In contrast, Advaita Vedanta, the central philosophy of the Hinduism championed by Vivekananda, was seen as being perfectly capable of harmonisation with modern science:

> It seems clear that the conclusions of modern materialistic science can be acceptable, harmoniously with their religion, only to the Vedantins or Hindus as they are called. It seems clear that modern materialism can hold its own and at the same time approach spirituality by taking up the conclusions of the Vedanta.[145]

As a basis, Vivekananda claimed that religion does not rest on external assertions of faith but is rather a matter of internal experience, something this new conception of Hinduism particularly stands for:

> Religion, as it is generally taught all over the world, is said to be based upon faith and belief, and, in most cases, consists only of different sets of theories, and that is the reason why we find all religions quarrelling with one another. ... Nevertheless, there is a basis of universal belief in religion, governing all the different theories and all the varying ideas of different sects in different countries. Going to their basis we find that they also are based upon universal experiences.[146]

Religion, as internal concern, was located in a place different to the one occupied by science:

> Intellectual reasoning is based on facts evident to the *senses*. Now religion has nothing to do with the senses. The agnostics say they cannot know God, and rightly, for they have exhausted the limits of their senses and yet get no further in knowledge of God. ... we have to go beyond the knowledge of the senses. All great prophets and seers claim to have 'seen God', that is to say, they have had direct experience. There is no knowledge without experience, and man has to see God in his own soul.[147]

Modern Hinduism meets the requirements of this inward understanding of religion and harmonizes best with science, being therefore superior to all other religions.

Similar to liberal Christian theologians, Vivekananda positioned his understanding of religion not only in view of science, but also by expressly incorporating Hinduism into a general religious history. He began his prominent speech at the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 with the assertion that Hinduism is a religion that has 'come down to us from time prehistoric' and that has survived since.[148] This gave Hinduism the right to claim a privileged place within general religious history.

As in liberal Christianity, the separation between science and religion has experienced continued reception in Hinduism in the subsequent period. A good example is Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) whose work stands in Vivekananda's tradition of advaitic Neo-Hinduism. He was one of the leading Hindu thinkers of his time, taught occasionally in Great Britain and later became the second president of India. Concerning the balance between religion and science he wrote:

143 King, *Orientalism*; Hatcher, *Eclecticism*; Hatcher, *Hinduism*.

144 Vivekananda, *Works*, VII.283.

145 Vivekananda, *Works*, I.185.

146 Vivekananda, *Works*, I.125–126.

147 Vivekananda, *Works*, VI.133, auch VIII.230.

148 Vivekananda, *Works*, I.6.

> It is wrong to think that science and religion are opposed to each other. Science and religion represent two dimensions to the human being, the rational and the spiritual. ... There is no conflict at all between the great developments of science and technology which we have and the true religious sense of wisdom which is essential for using these great instruments for the purpose of human welfare.[149]

3.4.2 Islam

To some extent, the Islamic counterpart to Vivekananda was Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), the founder of the prominent social reform-oriented college in Aligarh. Ahmad Khan's attempt to properly define Islam within his time also originated from a reflection on the conflict between science and Christianity:

> Nothing has done as much harm to the Christian religion as the [new] sciences. Christian scholars have made outstanding efforts to remove this damage, and they continue to do so. Only if they succeed will they preserve their religion from the blow dealt to it by the sciences, and in no other way.[150]

He concluded that the self-understanding of every religion has to recognize its own compatibility with science:

> Whatever religion it may be—Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Brahmanic religion—if today it turns out on the balance to be in contradiction to the sciences, then it cannot stand up.[151]

This means that every religion should be tested to see if it is in harmony with 'nature':

> Thus the only criterion for the truth of the religions which are present before us is whether the religion [in question] is in correspondence with the natural disposition of man, or with nature. If yes, then it is true ...[152]

149 Radhakrishnan, *Life*, 47, Radhakrishnan, *Revovery*, 74–77; Radhakrishnan, *Crisis*, 17.
150 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 305.
151 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 304.
152 Ahmad Khan (1884), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 316.

Ahmad Khan claimed that 'Islam is in full accordance with nature'.[153] To validate his judgement, Ahmad Khan developed a theory of religion. He drew his thoughts mainly from Islamic philosophy and European discussions are barely discernible, even though he was familiar with them. Eventually, he also conceptualized religion unequivocally as inwardness. The human being was seen as having a special 'habitus' through which he could experience the revelations and inspirations 'that fall into his heart'.[154] This capability could be of different degrees, but was seen as independent of whatever level of education and cognitive faculties. This capability essentially enables an experience of unity with God, the same that is also mentioned in texts of other religions, ranging from the Egyptians through the Vedas all the way to Abraham, and in modern times including Calvin, Luther, Keshab Chandra Sen and Dayanand Saraswati.[155] Making reference to these names, Ahmad Khan expressly introduced Islam into a general religious history.

Ahmad Khan gives special importance to the complete autonomy of the habitus that can experience both revelations and inspirations. Muhammad could 'experience this unity without association' despite lacking a formal education.[156] Revelations and inspirations are bestowed upon an individual first and find their way into inspired books only afterwards.[157] It is important to note that revelations and inspirations only refer to 'religion' (*maẓhab*)[158] and are fundamentally different to the contents of science. The knowledge of science is acquired through a different habitus.[159] Ahmad Khan concludes:

> Inspired books are related to moral and spiritual education. ... For this reason truly revealed books do not discuss those things which relate to other sciences.[160]

Moses remained a bearer of revelation and inspiration even if he 'did not know any rule of trigonometry or if he made a mistake in stating such a rule', for 'he was not a master of trigonometry or astronomy'.[161] Ahmad Khan

153 Ahmad Khan (1884), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 317.
154 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 293.
155 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 292–293.
156 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 293.
157 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 295–298.
158 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 297.
159 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 291–292.
160 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 298.
161 Ahmad Khan (1880), quoted after Troll, *Khan*, 297.

allotted religion a spiritual realm of experience, which he strictly separated from science. Accordingly, his understanding of religion smoothly blended into the global discussion, even though the concrete foundational patterns were different.

The separation of science and religion that Ahmad Khan proposed is still not uncommon today in south Asian Islam. A prominent example is Pervez Hoodbhoy (born in 1950), a nuclear physicist and lay theologian in Pakistan. He wrote with explicit reference to Ahmad Khan:

> In order to separate the domains of religion and science, it must be recognized that science is reason organized for understanding the material universe. Religion, on the other hand, is a reasoned and reasonable abdication of reason with regard to those questions which lie outside the reach of science, such as 'why does the universe exist?' or 'what is the purpose of life?'[162]

3.4.3 Buddhism

A look at colonial Ceylon paints a very different picture. There, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) was part of a reform of Theravada Buddhism that continues to shape today's Sri Lanka. The starting point was similar to other reform movements in Hinduism and Islam. He stated that Christianity was not compatible with science, for, 'with the birth of modern science [Christian] theology received a blow ... Theology is opposed to modern science'.[163] His answer was different though. Dharmapala did not emphasize a separation of science and Buddhism but understood Buddhism as a scientific religion. Dharmapala's position will be examined later in more detail. It is notable that he never precisely defined his understanding of religion in any of his works, nor did he classify Buddhism anywhere within a general exchange between science and religion.

On the other hand, Dharmapala did insert Buddhism into general religious history.[164] He stressed that Buddhism was 'historically, the oldest religion of the world'[165] and discussed in detail the weak points of other religions to justify the superiority of Buddhism, claiming that it did not need any external perceptions of God.[166]

162 Hoodbhoy, *Islam*, 137, 68–69, 77.
163 Guruge, *Return*, 452 (1915).
164 Guruge, *Return*, 155–183 (1916).
165 Guruge, *Return*, 156.
166 Guruge, *Return*, 160.

Over the further course of the twentieth century there were, however, other prominent voices representing Singhalese reform Buddhism that called for drawing clear boundaries between Buddhism and science. Walpola Rahula (1907–1997), a Theravada monk and influential Buddhist scholar from Sri Lanka in the tradition of the reform Buddhism established by Anagarika Dharmapala, wrote in 1989:

> Science is interested in the precise analysis and study of the material world, and it has no heart. It knows nothing about love or compassion or righteousness or purity of mind. It doesn't know the inner world of humankind. It only knows the external, material world that surrounds us. ... On the contrary, religion, particularly Buddhism, aims at the discovery and the study of humankind's inner world: ethical, spiritual, psychological, and intellectual.[167]

This demarcation between Theravada Buddhism and science is even clearer in the works of the contemporary Thai philosopher of religion Pinit Ratakanul:

> The Buddhist also commends science for its ability to expand our knowledge of physical reality. But when scientists trespass on the domain of morality and religion, they must fail to provide adequate explanations, for science is not competent to deal with value questions. ... the Buddhist admits that in the realm of physical reality scientific discovery needs to be taken seriously by every religion, for its accepted truth is the basis of modern knowledge.[168]

Unlike Singhalese Theravada Buddhism, in Japanese Buddhism there was a clear-cut division between science and religion in the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, the European debates on the relation between science and Christianity were well known in Japan. John William Draper was voraciously read and even Robert Ingersoll was no stranger to Japanese intellectuals of the time.[169] Reform Buddhist circles in Japan also stressed the incompatibility of science and Christianity. Hirai Kinzo, later a participant at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, wrote in an anti-

167 Quoted after Verhoeven, 'Buddhism', 93, 97; Lopez, *Science*, 19–24, 222.
168 Ratanakul, 'Buddhism', 119.
169 Schwantes, 'Christianity', 125–126.

Christian tract from the year 1883 that 'science has laid the Christian religion captive at its feet' thanks to such men as Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and Mill, who had 'striven to shake off this horrible religion'.[170]

By contrast, it was asserted that Japanese Buddhism stood in no way in conflict with science. Over the further course of the discussion, there were representative voices that approved of a clear demarcation. In 1906, the influential Buddhist intellectual Inoue Enryo (1858–1919) published a book under the title *Meishin to Shūkyō* (Superstition and Religion). Inoue Enryo's concept of religion rests on a strict division between the physical and spiritual worlds.[171] Religion is kept out of the domain of science. Scientific knowledge helps defeat demons, in other words, superstition. This does not affect Buddha or the Gods, for they are beings that have nothing to do with the physical world but rather refer to the absolute, which is beyond understanding. The domain of religion is the spiritual world alone and Buddhism should give up its claims on the physical world:

> in this world there are two aspects[,] the material and the spiritual. The transformations of the material world are controlled by physical laws. ... neither the buddhas nor kamis nor religion have control over the material world. Instead it must be observed that [religion] commands the foundations of the spiritual world.[172]

Accordingly, this is connected to the notion that the goal of religion is experiencing 'the absolute' or 'the absolute world': 'Religion teaches the way for our relative essence to enter into the absolute world'.[173]

Inoue Enryo grounded this division from science on an inward understanding of religion. This also answered to the challenge of religious history. Buddhism, as a religion, points to the same truth of other religions. As early as 1887 he had decidedly brought Japanese Buddhism into general religious history:[174]

> I am sure that the truth that forms the basis of religion is unchanging and immutable at all times and in all places. ... Among the innumerable religions of the world, the ones with the greatest strength in society are Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Of these three, Buddhism and Christianity are destined to compete in the world today.[175]

Declaring Buddhism as religion also meant propagating a uniform Buddhism for Japan and demanding standardization of the existing schools of Buddhist faith.[176]

Presumably, clear delimitations between science and religion have played a role in Japanese Buddhism since then. However, I have found no evidence to back this claim. It could also be that the concept of separation gradually lost ground to the "transgression of boundaries", which will be explained in what follows.

3.5 *Global* "Religion"

Sources show that it was not only Christianity that addressed the scientific challenge and the problem of a general religious history. At the very same time, similar discussions took place within Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Leading representatives of these traditions also started to understand themselves as part of a general religious history, and they proclaimed harmony with and difference from science. It was a global discourse from the start, and the settings are still in place.

4 Esotericism and the Religious "Transgression of Boundaries"

The demarcation of boundaries between religion and science is prominently represented even to this day, but it has been controversial from the very beginning. Many people considered the assertion of friendly and peaceful coexistence and of fundamental differentiation between a scientific materialist and a religious spiritual understanding of the world unsatisfactory. A "transgression of boundaries" (Rade) was from the very beginning the basic companion to the "drawing of boundaries", which needed to be honored as such. Crucial for the understanding of these transgressions is that their attempt to overcome the separation between "science" and "religion" required that there existed such a separation in the first place. Any idea of transgression depended on the notion of the separation which had emerged.

170 Hirai Kinzo (1883), quoted after Thelle, 'Encounters', 99.
171 Josephson, 'Buddhism', 151–162.
172 Inoue Enryo (1916), quoted after Josephson, 'Buddhism', 156.
173 Inoue Enryo (1916), quoted after Josephson, 'Buddhism', 159.
174 Staggs, *Defence*; Staggs, 'Defend'; Thelle, *Buddhism*; Schrimpf, *Begegnung*, 71–76.
175 Inoue Enryo, 'Bukkyo', 360.
176 Staggs, *Defence*; Ketelaar, *Heretics*, 177, 184–191.

The decisive role that esotericism played in the conceptualisation of these transgressions of boundaries is often overlooked, or rather, it was thanks to these respective debates that modern esotericism emerged. "Esotericism" and "religion" are in this sense concepts that arose simultaneously. Esotericism widely advanced and promoted the tendency in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam to understand these religions as "scientific religions". The complex and globally entangled discourse between scientists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists who propagated a religious transgression of boundaries will be illustrated in the following pages. The example of Islam in South Asia—similar to the example of Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon presented in the previous section—shows again that we are not dealing with necessary but with contingent developments. Before we come to this a closer look at the important esoteric movements of the late nineteenth century is necessary, including their close proximity to certain scientists and liberal theologians.

4.1 *Esotericism*

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, esoteric movements played an increasingly important role in the debate about "science" and "religion". They turned against the alleged materialist "tunnel vision" of science, while at the same time affirming that it was possible to scientifically substantiate religion—in other words, to describe forms of life and supernatural phenomena empirically and scientifically.[177] Even though the concept of science was applied in a way that stood in direct contradiction to contemporary scientific research, this program found more than a few adherents. We first find this situation in spiritualism, a movement that had its origins in the possible and empirically verifiable contact with the dead in the spirit world. Contact with the dead, made possible through the assistance of a medium, was seen as irrefutable proof that souls existed independently from matter and as direct rebuttal of materialism.

Apart from spiritualism, occultism also attempted to rebut materialism empirically. Carl Freiherr du Prel (1839–1899) called occultism 'acceptable for science' because it 'consistently repeats that it only wants to be hitherto unknown science'. In it, one can 'already identify the foundations of the system of hitherto unknown science, which will constitute the coming century'.[178] Frederic W.H. Myers (1843–1901) took this a step further. One of the most influential British occultists of the nineteenth century, he also pursued 'the discovery of the spiritual world through scientific methods'. This would give rise to a scientific religion 'just as general as science, just as evolutionary as science, and resting on a durable and demonstrable relation of the whole spiritual and material worlds'.[179]

177 Hanegraaff, *New Age*; Hammer, *Claiming*, 201–330; Asprem, *Problem*.

178 du Prel, *Magie*, II.25, 93.

Occult issues were also discussed in the Theosophical Society, the most influential esoteric organisation of the late nineteenth century. It was founded in 1875 by H.P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Olcott (1832–1907), and was headquartered in India from 1882 onwards. Its program states as one of its goals the investigation of 'the hidden mysteries of nature' and 'the psychic and spiritual powers latent in man'.[180]

> What we have to do is to seek to obtain *knowledge* of all the laws of nature, and to diffuse it. To encourage the study of those laws least understood by modern people, the so-called Occult Sciences, *based on the true knowledge of* nature, instead of, as at present, on *superstitious beliefs based on blind faith and authority*.[181]

Theosophy claimed a scientific foundation for its complex theories. At the same time, it was based on the absolute primacy of the spirit and gives the spiritual sphere priority over its material counterpart. Accordingly, it understands all life on this planet as a product of this spiritual sphere and not as a product of the development of matter. While materialism was attacked, its scientific entitlement was taken over. The cosmic and anthropological plan of development projected by theosophy within a theory of emanation was also understood as evolutionary and explicitly announced as the true scientific definition of evolution. This was intertwined with a vitriolic criticism of the church:

> theosophy does no more than point out and seriously draw the attention of the world to the fact that the *supposed* disagreement between religion and science is conditioned, on one hand by the intelligent materialists rightly kicking against absurd human dogmas, and on the other by blind fanatics and interested church-men who, instead of defending the souls of mankind, fight simply tooth and nail for their personal bread and butter and authority ...[182]

179 Myers (1903), quoted after Turner, *Religion*, 117.

180 Blavatsky, *Key*, 39.

181 Blavatsky, *Key*, 48.

182 Blavatsky, 'Religion', 172–173.

Consequently, H.P. Blavatsky's main work carried the subheading 'the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy'.[183] The book deals with the unity of religion and science and the idea of a scientific religion.

Another important example for the esoteric transgression of boundaries between science and religion are the works of the German-American philosopher Paul Carus (1852–1919).[184] Carus, by his own account, became a Buddhist in 1880 and migrated from Germany to the United States in 1883. He played an important role in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and can be considered the founder of Buddhism in the United States. His main issue was a philosophical one, which he pursued with the publication of his two journals, *The Open Court* and *The Monist*, both of which enjoyed significant popularity. *The Monist* was a platform used by many renowned academics of different disciplines and direction (for example the parapsychologist Max Dessoir, the physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach, the psychologist of religion William James, and the pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce). Carus championed the idea of a new scientific religion:

> I know that the new religion which grows out of science ... will not come to destroy. The new religion will come to fulfill the old faith.[185]

Carus defined God as the universal system of indispensable laws to be discovered by science.[186] Nevertheless, he also describes God as '[His creatures'] life, their home whence they start, and the goal whither they return',[187] which sounds like an emanationist position similar to theosophy.

The esoteric attempts to form a scientific religion did apparently gain resonance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which can be explained through their close proximity to the dominating discourse of the time. Esoteric approaches influenced scientists and Christian theologians who were themselves not satisfied with the new border regime. This deserves special attention.

4.1.1 Science

A few respected scientists were unsatisfied with the self-restraint of science described above, and they got interested in esoteric ideas. The most prominent

183 Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*.
184 Henderson, *Catalyst*.
185 Carus (1890), quoted after Henderson, *Catalyst*, 46.
186 Henderson, *Catalyst*, 47.
187 Carus (1908), quoted after Henderson, *Catalyst*, 47.

example is Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913). Together with Darwin, he was the co-discoverer of the theory of evolution and was likewise considered one of its most vehement public champions in nineteenth-century Great Britain. By his own account, he acted sometimes 'more Darwinian than Darwin himself'.[188]

Wallace first took a decidedly materialist position, but embraced spiritualism from 1865, holding several sessions with mediums from that time onwards.[189] This led him to advocate for a modification of Darwinian anthropology in the 1860s, claiming that natural selection could not satisfactorily explain the spiritual or moral nature of the human being. It should instead be assumed 'that an Overruling Intelligence has watched over the action of those laws, so directing variations and so determining the accumulation, as finally to produce an organization sufficiently perfect to admit of, and even to aid in, the indefinite advancement of our mental and moral nature'.[190] At the same time, Wallace also considered spiritualism 'a science of human nature which is founded on observed facts':[191]

> Spiritualism is an experimental science, and affords the only sure foundation for a true philosophy and a pure religion.[192]

Even though these ideas were met by his colleagues in the scientific establishment with critique, Wallace, who largely abstained from making direct references to spiritualism in his scientific texts, continued to receive scientific accolades and fellowships even after his penchant for spiritualism had become publicly known. This has to do with the fact that spiritualism in Great Britain initially received some attention among scientists because it experimentally attempted to disprove materialist claims to an absolute explanation of the world. The Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, temporarily counted several leading scientists among its members.[193] These borders were set more tightly only in Germany, where adherents of spiritualism, such as the Leipzig professor for astrophysics Friedrich Zöllner (1834–1882), were largely isolated.[194]

188 Wallace, *Life*, II.22.
189 Turner, *Religion*, 68–103; Oppenheim, *Other World*, 296–325.
190 Wallace (1869), quoted after, Turner, *Religion*, 94.
191 Wallace, *Miracles*, 228.
192 Wallace, *Miracles*, 228.
193 Oppenheim, *Other World*, 135–136; 330.
194 Wolffram, *Science*.

Another interesting example was the philosopher and historian John Fiske (1842–1901). He was for the United States what his friend Huxley was for Great Britain.[195] Fiske was decidedly influenced by American Transcendentalism, which had many affinities with contemporary esotericism.[196] Unlike Huxley in Great Britain, he was convinced that it was possible to combine scientific knowledge with religious manifestations of faith, for they refer to the same and only truth. Science and religion had to be seen as allies instead of enemies in their mutual reference to a 'cosmic theism'.[197]

These two examples show that scientists' responses were not only limited to radical materialism or self-restraint. From the very beginning there were scientists who wanted to reunite "science" with "religion" at the time when both were about to be separated. This attempted reunion more than often happened under the impact of esoteric approaches.

4.1.2 Christianity

In the late nineteenth century, voices against the newly drawn borders could be found even within liberal Protestant theology. These critics tried for decidedly Christian interpretations of the theory of evolution as a kind of revised natural theology. This did not mean a return to old orthodoxies but included the reinterpretation of traditional elements of the Christian faith and their adjustment to scientific notions. Accordingly, the American Unitarian theologian Judson Minot Savage (1841–1918) thought that the Christian teaching of creation could be understood through the theory of evolution:

> I can put my finger into his own finger-prints; and I can see God's life in the growth and progress of nature about me.[198]

Matter was seen not as dead but rather as a form of life representing a link in the uninterrupted chain of development that culminated in the emergence of the human being. 'The God of evolution' was 'the hidden life and secret force of this unfolding universe of ours'.[199] It comes as no surprise to hear that Savage sympathized with spiritualism and held 'the belief in continued personal existence as capable of [scientific] proof'.[200] Whereas the esoteric

195 Berman, *Fiske*.
196 Jackson, *Oriental*.
197 bes. Pannill, Religious Faith, 147–176.
198 Savage, *Religion*, 26, Benz, *Theologie*, 58.
199 Savage, *Religion*, 56, Benz, *Theologie*, 59.
200 Savage, *Telepathy*, vi.

influence on Savage is well-established, there were certainly other Christian theological voices at the time that pleaded for a transgression of boundaries but were not influenced by esotericism, namely James McCosh (1811–1894) and Henry Drummond (1851–1897).[201] Official Catholic doctrine at the end of the nineteenth century also denied what it considered to be an inadequate division of the different spheres of knowledge,[202] as did parts of the evangelical movement in the United States.[203] Not all of these were influenced by esoteric approaches, hence one should be careful not to overemphasize its impact on Christian theology at the time.

4.2 *Global Impact of Esotericism*

In order to fully appreciate the role of esotericism in religions' transgression of boundaries since the end of the nineteenth century one has to recognize its global impact. In striking parallel to "religion", the esoteric concern for a unification of "science" and "religion" was a global endeavor right from the start. The theosophical theories had a far-reaching influence on Buddhism and Hinduism. Key to understanding this is appreciating the anti-colonial orientation of the Theosophical Society. The theosophists aligned themselves with local elites both in India and in Ceylon, and helped them introduce social and political reforms directed against colonial overlords. In a similar vein, Paul Carus' ideas of a scientific religion were developed within a global encounter with Asian Buddhists.

Esotericism has remained a global discourse since then. The New Age movement is the best example. New Age author Fritjof Capra undertook an esoteric interpretation of modern science, particularly physics, with the goal of substantiating the idea of a religion grounded in science.[204] To a certain extent he leased new life to the concerns of theosophy and Paul Carus. However, Capra's crucial point was that he already saw this scientific religion as embodied in great part in the 'eastern' religions. As will be shown below this idea suggests that a globalization of esotericism had already taken place. More recent esoteric influences on Christian attempts to overcome the separation of science and religion also show the persistently global dimension of the discourse. The prominent example would be the Benedictine Bede Griffiths (1906–1993) who led an ashram in India and was heavily influenced by the Advaita Vedanta

201 McCosh, *Evolution*; Chadwick, *Church*, 29; Benz, *Theologie*, 63.
202 Denzinger–Hünermann Nr. 3287; Hübner, *Theologie*, 43–56; 114–143.
203 Orr, 'Science', 286–287; Numbers, *Creationists*.
204 Bochinger, *Religion*, 421–511; Lopez, *Science*, 25–28.

philosophy of Neo-Hinduism. He wanted to overcome the materialism of 'western science' and lead Christianity back to the eternal tradition of knowledge (*philosophia perennis*), in which spirit and matter are united.[205] Griffiths clearly borrowed these ideas from esotericism. He explicitly referred to Fritjof Capra and coincided on this issue with Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the latter being another excellent example of the global nature of esotericism.

4.2.1 Buddhism

Esoteric transgressions of boundaries in the Theosophical Society and in the circle around Paul Carus, both of which propagated a scientific religion, enjoyed direct positive reception from Asian Buddhists. Paul Carus saw in Buddhism the scientific religion of the future. In the beginning, his interest was limited to the teachings of the historical Buddha as speculatively reconstructed by European Orientalists and German Buddhists.[206] This "primitive" Buddhism was considered to be rational and scientific. Its most popular dissemination was due to a biography of the Buddha written by the best-selling Victorian author Edwin Arnold (1832–1904).[207] Arnold explained his interpretation of the "original" Buddhism during a lecture held in 1889 at the Imperial University in Tokyo in the following way:

> I have often said, and I shall say it again and again, that between Buddhism and modern science there exists a close intellectual bond. ... if we gather up all the results of modern research, and look away from the best literature to the largest discovery in physics and the latest word in biology, what is the conclusion—the high and joyous conclusion—forced upon the mind, except that which renders true Buddhism so glad and hopeful?[208]

One crucial point was that Paul Carus gave up his former concentration on "primitive" Buddhism after having met followers of reform Buddhism from Ceylon and Japan at the World Parliament of Religions. By that time, they had already begun propagating the compatibility of Buddhism and science.[209] Influenced by this encounter, Carus declared that 'we do not look upon later

205 Griffiths, *Vision*.
206 Baumann, *Buddhisten*; Tweed, *Encounter*, 60–68.
207 Arnold, *Light*.
208 Arnold, *Seas*, 256; Lopez, *Science*, 13–14.
209 Henderson, *Catalyst*, 92–93; Snodgrass, *Buddhism*, 227–229.

Buddhism with the same contempt as is customary among many Buddhist scholars'.[210]

When he then referred to the Buddha as 'the first prophet of the religion of science', who 'anticipated even in important details the results of a scientific world conception',[211] he was also linking his subject to contemporary reform Buddhism. Reform Buddhism was given the opportunity, with reference to Paul Carus, not only to preach its compatibility with science, but also to present itself as a 'scientific religion'. Carus discussed this question directly with his reformed Buddhist friends, encouraging them along the way to adopt a corresponding position. His direct influence can be established both in Ceylon and Japan.

Carus found particularly fertile ground in Ceylon. As mentioned above, Singhalese reform Buddhism had already adopted the notion of being a scientific religion even before Carus' encounter with it. The main reason for this was that the Orientalist discourse of "primitive" Buddhism being allegedly compatible with science had already been used against the attacks of Christian missionaries.[212] This laid the foundation for the work of the Theosophical Society, which made a decisive contribution to the successful establishment of reform Buddhism in Ceylon.[213] The theosophists passionately spread their views on the unity of science and Buddhism. The *Buddhist Catechism*, written by Henry Olcott and used for teaching in the newly established Buddhist schools, included its own section on 'Buddhism and science'. Buddhism was clearly characterized as a scientific religion.[214] Paul Carus wrote to Dharmapala about his idea of scientific Buddhism in 1896:

> Buddha's intention was nothing else than to establish what we call a religion of science. "Enlightenment" and "science" are interchangeable words.[215]

Long before Dharmapala received this letter he had become familiar with the idea of scientific Buddhism. One should note that Paul Carus clearly distanced himself from occultism and theosophy, also communicating this to Dharma-

210 Carus, *Buddhism*, 230, Henderson, *Catalyst*, 115.
211 Paul Carus, *The Open Court*, vol. X, Chicago, 12.3.1896, p. 4845.
212 Guruge, *Return*, 19–20 (1893); Young & Somaratna, *Debates*; McMahan, *Making*, 89–116.
213 Prothero, *Buddhist*; Gombrich, *Theravada*.
214 Lopez, *Science*, 12.
215 Dharmpala (1896), quoted after Henderson, *Catalyst*, 115.

pala.[216] Similarly, Dharmapala distanced himself permanently from the Theosophical Society following Olcott's death in the year 1907. Dharmapala continued to adhere to the idea of scientific Buddhism, as evinced by the following statement from 1926:

> The Message of the Buddha that I have to bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths. The Buddha taught ... a scientific religion ...[217]

This view subsequently became very popular in Singhalese Buddhism. The philosopher of religion and professor at the University of Ceylon K.N. Jayatilleke (1920–1970) can be considered a prominent example of this.[218] Jayatilleke stood directly in line with the tradition of reform Buddhism established by Dharmapala:

> Such is the teaching of early Buddhism which is offered as a self-consistent scientific hypothesis touching the matters of religion and morality which each person can verify for himself. In fact, not being based on revelation, the fact that it has been verified by him and hundreds of his disciples and is capable of being verified by every earnest seeker is put forward as the criterion of its truth by the Buddha. The empirical and pragmatic test of science is, for the Buddha, the test of true religion. ... Like the scientists ... the Buddhas or the Perfect Ones have merely discovered these truths which are there for all time and have preached them for the good of the world.[219]

Jayatilleke's understanding of Theravada Buddhism found broad recognition at the time. It was the British scholar of religion Ninian Smart who edited a posthumous collection of Jayatilleke's essays. In the foreword, he characterized the author as 'a considerable and important scholar',[220] whose work 'is an excellent guide to the teachings of Theravada Buddhism'.[221]

The idea of a scientific Buddhism was not limited to Theravada reform Buddhism in Ceylon but became popular in Japan too. Again, Paul Carus played a

216 Paul Carus, *The Open Court*, vol. x, Chicago, 12.3.1896, p. 4844; Henderson, *Catalyst*, 94.
217 Guruge, *Return*, 27 (1926).
218 Rothermund, *Buddhismus*.
219 Jayatilleke, 'Buddhism', 6.
220 Smart, *Message*, 7.
221 Smart, *Message*, 7.

role in this. During the World Parliament of Religions, Carus came into close contact with Shaku Soyen (1856–1919) and cultivated thenceforth a close relationship with him.[222] Shaku Soyen was one of the most important reformers of Japanese Zen Buddhism. In his final report on the work of the Japanese delegation at the World Parliament of Religions, he singled out the question of science as a central topic: 'Buddhism is a universal religion and it closely corresponds to what science and philosophy say today'.[223] The influence of Paul Carus became even stronger and lasting after Shaku Soyen sent his disciple D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966) to the United States for further studies. Suzuki worked from 1897 to 1909 in Paul Carus' publishing house and lived in his house. During his stay at Paul Carus' home, Suzuki wrote a book on Mahayana Buddhism in which he emphatically supported the notion of 'scientific Buddhism':

> Buddhism never discourages the scientific critical investigation of religious beliefs. For it is one of the functions of science that it should purify the contents of a belief and that it should point out in which direction our final spiritual truth and consolation have to be sought. Science alone which is built on relative knowledge is not able to satisfy all our religious cravings, but it is certainly able to direct us to the path of enlightenment.[224]

Suzuki later became one of the best known teachers of Zen Buddhism on the international level. At the same time, he was not only married to an American theosophist but also pursued diverse esoteric interests, as evinced by his comprehensive knowledge of Swedenborg and his collaboration with the Eranos circle.[225] During his stay in the United States, Suzuki presented Paul Carus with an English rendering of lectures by Shaku Soen,[226] which was heavily edited and contained many of his own thoughts. It states that 'Buddha's teachings are in exact agreement with the doctrines of modern science'.[227] At the same time it acknowledged that 'philosophy and science have done a great deal for the advancement of our knowledge of the universe' but 'what they teach concerns the shell and husk of reality'. It did now allow followers to 'stop short at this', for the ultimate goal should be attaining the knowledge 'which will reveal us the

222 Henderson, *Catalyst*, 97–106.
223 Shaku Soyen (ca. 1894), quoted after Lopez, *Science*, 22.
224 Suzuki, *Outlines*, 97, Lopez, *Science*, 23.
225 Suzuki, *Swedenborg*; Hakl, *Eranos*.
226 Shaku Soyen, *Sermons*, iv.
227 Shaku Soyen, *Sermons*, 122, Joskovich, 'Zen'.

inmost life of the universe'.[228] Following this reasoning, the latter was accomplished by Buddhism as a scientific religion.

The idea that Buddhism and science entirely coincide, with the latter being simultaneously subordinated to the former, received wide support in the course of the twentieth century. The best example might be the so-called Kyoto School,[229] where this idea found support starting from Nishida Kitaro (1870–1945) and Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) all the way to Abe Masao (1915–2006). Abe made the following warning:

> Science without religion is dangerous, for it necessarily entails a complete mechanization of humanity. On the other hand, religion without science is powerless in that it lacks an effective means by which to actualize religious meaning in the contemporary world.[230]

Abe further explained that a properly understood Buddhism could solve this problem by combining the advantages of both science and religion.[231] The Kyoto School was not the sole heiress to the idea of a scientific Buddhism in Japan. This idea was also positively received in the Japanese Neo-Buddhist scene. For example, many claims stressing the concordance between science and Buddhism can be found in the texts of Rissho Kosei-kai, which also propagate the idea of a scientific Buddhism.[232]

In the late 1960s, the topic of scientific Buddhism suddenly became once again an object of wide and international interest within esoteric circles. Fritjof Capra stated programmatically 'that the principal theories and models of modern physics lead to a view of the world which is internally consistent and in perfect harmony with the views of Eastern mysticism'.[233] Capra reconstructed his essence of 'Eastern Mysticism' through references to Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. The crucial point is that Capra did not only refer to the standard esoteric and Orientalist sources but also to representatives of Asian religions who presented their tradition as a scientific religion. Arguably his most important source on Asian Buddhism was none other that Suzuki.[234] Capra's depiction of 'Eastern Mysticism' deals with 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism', 'Chinese

228 Shaku Soyen, *Sermons*, 135, Joskovich, 'Zen'.
229 Joskovich, 'Zen'.
230 Abe, *Zen*, 248, Joskovich, 'Zen'.
231 Abe, *Zen*, 275, Joskovich, 'Zen'.
232 Nehring, *Rissho Kosei-kai*, 123–125.
233 Capra, *Tao*, 303.
234 Bochinger, *Religion*, 441–442; Lopez, *Science*, 27–28.

Thought', and 'Taoism', and concludes with a special section on 'Zen'.[235] With Capra, a cycle of global esoteric discourse on the unity of science and religion concluded.

Capra's approach enjoyed lasting impact in the subsequent period among Tibetan Buddhists who actively pursued his ideas. In the 1970s, the Tibetan Buddhist community in exile entered into close alliance with esoteric circles actively reciprocating support regarding the concerns of gaining political independence from China. These circles were in turn also influenced by New Age ideas, particularly those of Capra.[236] In the subsequent period, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama took an active role in the discussion of "scientific Buddhism", which enriched the enormous popularity it now enjoys.[237] Since then, this topic has been discussed at numerous roundtables between scientists and Buddhist scholars. In 2010, an official website of Tibetan Buddhism in exile reported that 'His Holiness the Dalai Lama asks Japanese Priests to Produce Buddhist Scientists'.[238] This represented the closure of another cycle of the global discourse on the relationship between science and religion, one which had again been largely determined by the influence of esotericism.

4.2.2 Hinduism

Transgression of boundaries can already be observed in the reform Hinduism constituted toward the end of the nineteenth century. Even some of Vivekananda's statements could be understood along these lines. Overall, he seems to be more in favor of a separation of science and religion, but he also wrote:

> It seems to us ... that the conclusions of modern science are the very conclusions the Vedanta reached ages ago.[239]

The extent to which Vivekananda and the thinkers associated with him were influenced on this issue by theosophical thinking requires further research. There are several hints that this was the case.[240] For other Hindu reformers like Gandhi, there is unquestionable proof.[241] In any case, clearly formulated concepts of a scientific Hinduism, or more precisely a scientific Advaita Vedanta

235 Capra, *Tao*, 85–126.
236 Bishop, *Myth*; Lopez, *Prisoners*.
237 Lopez, *Science*.
238 www.dalailama.com/news, June 21st 2010 (11.7.2015).
239 Vivekananda, *Works*, III.185.
240 van der Veer, *Encounters*.
241 Bergunder, 'Gandhi'.

as one of Hinduism's central philosophies, can be found in the subsequent period within the Ramakrishna Order founded by Vivekananda. Swami Ranganathananda (1908–2005) wrote in 1972:

> All science is the search for unity. Vedanta discovered this unity in Atman; it followed its own method relevant to this field of enquiry. But it illustrated its conclusions with whatever positive knowledge was available at the time. In recent centuries this knowledge has been advanced radically by modern science, the impact of which on Vedanta, has been most whole-some. In fact, Vedanta hopes for and welcomes further radical advances in modern science by which its own spiritual vision of the One in the many may be corroborated by positive scientific knowledge.[242]

Ranganathananda considers the results of scientific research to be true when they verify the religious experience.[243] He illustrates this point through several examples.[244] Should scientific results contradict the Vedanta then they should be rejected, for they only pertain to the outer world of the senses. In this case, science 'overreaches' into the realm exclusive to the competences of the 'science of religion'.[245] One should note that in this argument the relationship between science and religion remains somewhat flexible.

With the rise of Hindu nationalism in India since the 1980s, a political redefinition of Hinduism took place to justify the Hinduification of the whole of Indian society. Here, subtle overtones are lost, for this concerned counterposing "Hinduism's own Vedic" science to its "western" counterpart, with the former being at least equal, if not superior, to the latter. This led to declarations such as 'the Rig-Veda is a book of particle physics'.[246] It was also affirmed that the scientific definition of time and space as achieved by Albert Einstein had been first identified by Vedic philosophers.[247] The propagation of "Vedic Science" as an equal alternative to the natural sciences was even temporarily applied by Hindu nationalist government circles as a concrete policy of higher education. Accordingly, "Vedic astrology" was introduced into several universities as an independent academic discipline in the year 2001.[248] In 2002, the

242 Ranganathananda (1971), quoted after Gosling, *Science*, 72.
243 Gosling, *Science*, 72.
244 Gosling, *Science*, 73–74.
245 Gosling, *Science*, 73.
246 Quoted after Nanda, *Prophets*, 65.
247 Nanda, *Prophets*, 74.
248 Nanda, *Prophets*, 72.

Indian government financed research projects to develop biological and chemical weapons based on the study of texts in Sanskrit about warfare and the art of ruling (*arthashastra*).[249] Such attempts were limited to mere episodes in the face of massive protests from within Indian academia. They nevertheless show the high degree of relevance that this topic enjoys in Hindu nationalism today, and its rise cannot be understood without reference to a global esoteric discourse.

4.2.3 Islam

Nowadays, Islam in South Asia is also familiar with the idea of an "Islamic science", but this is a rather recent development. No clear precursor from colonial India can be found, as was the case with Hinduism and Buddhism. Today's discourse of an Islamic science in South Asia is largely influenced by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born in 1933), which again marks global esoteric influence.[250] Nasr was born and raised in Iran but received his education in the United States. He subsequently taught in Teheran until leaving Iran again in the wake of the revolution of 1979. He has worked at American universities since then. Nasr incorporates Persian philosophy, particularly the neoplatonic "School of Isfahan",[251] combining this with newer esoteric concepts, particularly those of Fritjof Schuon. Since the 1980s Nasr has belonged to the so-called "Traditionalist School", made up of leading international representatives of esoteric traditionalism.[252]

At the core of Nasr's work is an acrimonious criticism of secular modernity and the modern 'western' science it spawned. Instead, he demands a reconsideration of the eternal and forgotten tradition of wisdom (*philosophia perennis*) superseded by modernity, which teaches the holistic unity of the human being with God and brings mankind back into communion with the Holy. He aims to replace 'western' science with a 'sacred science' which observes these precepts, fundamentally overcoming the division of spirit and matter. To this end, he sees Islamic tradition as being particularly helpful, and he refers mainly to authors from the "School of Isfahan" such as Mulla Sadra (c. 1571–1640). Nasr formulated an 'Islamic science' and became actively involved in a project propagating it. His initiative has found astonishing resonance in the Islamic world.[253]

249 Nanda, *Prophets*, 73.
250 Smith, 'Nasr'.
251 Halm, *Schia*, 116–120; Babayan, 'Mystics', 408.
252 Hanegraaff, *Dictionary*, 1132–1134.
253 Hoodbhoy, *Islam*, 69–74.

Acceptance of his ideas has happened selectively, for the Persian-neoplatonic philosophy which Nasr attempts to push is not entirely compatible with many contemporary Islamic currents that also champion the idea of Islamic science. Nasr's ideas entered South Asia in the 1980s, when a Muslim Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in Aligarh. This association started publishing its own journal shortly afterward.[254] Nasr published a programmatic essay on Islamic science in one of the first issues.[255] His holistic perspective can also be recognized in a keynote statement of the association as well as in the selective reception of his ideas. His keynote imposes a constriction on the Islamic tradition, which Nasr in a way counteracts through his insistence on a universal and eternal tradition of wisdom:

> Islamic science is an integral part of Islam as a complete way of life, the only framework within which it can be defined; it cannot be inculcated in isolation from the mainstream of the Islamic intellectual and moral landscape. Islamic science that is a sub-species of Islam (and not of science) generates a world view within the overall framework of Islamic values.[256]

Nasr's impact in South Asia is manifold. Ziauddin Sardar, a British Muslim of Pakistani descent and widely read in South Asia, is also inspired by him. Sardar calls for a radical victory over 'western science' because of 'the arrogance and violence inherent in its methodology, and the ideology of domination and control which has become its hallmark'.[257] In lieu of 'western science', he wants to see the establishment of an 'Islamic science' based on the 'basic values of Islamic culture'.[258] The works of Sardar also show a selective reception of Nasr. Sardar considers that Nasr 'errs by overemphasizing the metaphysical aspects of Islamic science at the expense of its quantitative aspects', and therefore criticizes his idea of a universal tradition of wisdom.[259] Despite the different interpretations, the overwhelming influence of Nasr on the debate of 'Islamic science' in South Asia shows again the great global influence of esotericism on the religious transgression of boundaries.[260]

254 Habib, 'Science', 57.

255 Habib 'Science', 57–58.

256 Rais Ahmad (1990), quoted after Habib, 'Science', 58.

257 Sardar, 'Science', 457.

258 Sardar, 'Science', 457.

259 Hoodbhoy, *Islam*, 75.

260 It should be noticed that there is another variety of "Islamic science" with a number of followers in South Asia, which deserves attention too. It can be traced back to Maurice Bucaille (1920–1998) and is an Islamic variety of Christian creationism or of Intelligent Design (Hoodbhoy, *Islam*, 67–69; Riexinger, 'Responses'; Bigliardi, 'Snakes'; Bigliardi, 'Strange').

5 Conclusion: Toward a Global Religious History

The historical sources presented in this paper show (1) that the final forging of our current understanding of "religion" and "esotericism" did not take place before the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and (2) that it was a global endeavor right from the beginning. Previous research has not fully appreciated the new situation that arose because of scientific materialism and the challenge presented by conceptions of general religious history. Both led to a new inward understanding of religion that has shaped the modern self-understanding of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as such religions. Furthermore, this debate was global from the beginning.

The historical theory that informs the historiographical narrative presented in this article derives from Michel Foucault's understanding of genealogy.[261] The question regarding the emphasis on continuity and discontinuity through genealogy remains inevitably controversial, and refers back to the unavoidable presence of perspectivism in the genealogical operation. Moreover, it is never a decision between one or the other. There is neither pure continuity nor pure discontinuity; there is always both, and scholarly assessment necessitates balance between them. The historiographical statement of continuity or discontinuity is also in itself a hegemonic closure that is contingent. However, the scholarly establishment of continuity and discontinuity is neither arbitrary, nor purely subjective, because its plausibility must be able to relate directly to the historical sources. When some scholars argue that there is a continuity from liberal Christian theology back to Schleiermacher or even to the earlier periods, and when they insist on a "western concept" of "religion" or "esotericism", this is an argument that anyone is free to make. However, one would have to explain why the challenge presented by a conception of general religious history, the impact of scientific materialism, and global colonial discourse did *not* mean a decisive caesura, and one would have to interpret the respective sources accordingly.

The historical findings presented in this article carry with them some consequences for the understanding of religion in academic disciplines dedicated to its study. As elaborated elsewhere,[262] this may be the starting point for devel-

261 Bergunder, 'Religion', 271.

262 Bergunder, 'Religion'.

oping a historical understanding of religion that can serve as subject matter in religious studies. Furthermore, it becomes clear that global religious history since the nineteenth century needs more investigation in order to deliver a more precise and differentiated understanding of the links presented in this article in rather broad strokes. "Religion" and "esotericism" have developed not only in chronological parallel but also through mutual influences. Understanding today's esotericism as the product of a global development since the late nineteenth century is at odds with many scholarly approaches to the study of esotericism. Again, this is no final verdict against different historiographical narratives on esotericism; rather, they must provide alternative interpretations of the respective sources. Moreover, the different ways of framing the history of "esotericism" are the result of differences in attempts at understanding it. In the end, it brings us back to the question: What is esotericism? My argument here is for a historical and global understanding of esotericism to be studied within global religious history.[263]

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263 Bergunder, 'Esotericism'; Bergunder, 'Gandhi'.

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