

Introduction  
*Franz Cumont and the Historical-Religious Study  
of Early Christianity in Late 19<sup>th</sup> and  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*

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This volume is the fruit of the concluding conference of the research project conducted at Ghent University about the comparative historiography of early Christianity by Franz Cumont (1868–1947). The project more precisely investigated the position of this leading Belgian historian of religions within the fiery late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century debates on the interrelation between ancient Christianity on the one hand, and the ancient “mystery religions” and “oriental religions”, on the other.<sup>1</sup> One of the last all-round experts of Antiquity and one of the most influential scholars of his time, Cumont especially achieved international fame with his research on the oriental religions that flourished in the Roman Empire, first and foremost through his studies on the cult of Mithras with whom his name has remained indissolubly connected, but also on those of gods like Attis, Cybele, Isis, Osiris, the Syrian Ba’als or Atargatis.

An important, if not the most important question transecting almost his entire vast oeuvre was to explain the monumental religious transformation that took place during Late Antiquity, from ancient polytheism with its less or more sublimated gods of nature

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1 For the partially overlapping 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century use of the terms “mystery” (viz. “mystery cult”, “mystery religion”) and “oriental religions”, see *infra* section 1 of this introduction.

to Christian monotheism with its transcendent conception of the divine.<sup>2</sup> Of this transformation, he wanted to understand the spiritual, moral, and intellectual ramifications, always studying religion in close conjuncture with the scientific, philosophical, and political developments of late Antiquity.<sup>3</sup> In Cumont's grand narrative, the oriental religions constituted a quintessential hermeneutical key to understand the transforming religious landscape: they introduced a new kind of religion in the Roman West which both revitalized "traditional" Roman paganism, and facilitated the spread of Christianity with which they bore many resemblances.<sup>4</sup> Cumont's work heavily impacted the ongoing historical-critical debates on the formative ages of Christianity, even if he himself remained noticeably reluctant to pass an opinion on the origins of the many similarities he observed between the oriental religions and Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

His research put the spotlight on these alleged trailblazers of Christianity at a time of vibrant innovation in the study of religion. A time when the secular academic study of religion, then often referred to as *history of religions*,<sup>6</sup> was emancipating itself from the long dominant Christian-theological approaches, and fueled polemical discussions on the self-claimed unicity and absolute truth claims of the Western-European Christian traditions. The historical-comparative approach to Christianity and related religions opposed scholars from divergent methodological, confessional, and ideological backgrounds, as will become apparent throughout the contributions to this volume. They also sharpened ongoing theological and philosophical discussions about the fate of traditional Christianity in modern European societies.

Although Cumont's importance for these foundational debates within the nascent discipline of history of religions is widely acknowledged, his own views on the relation between the oriental religions and Christianity have not yet been the subject of systematic historiographical enquiry. The central aims of this volume are threefold: to reconstruct Cumont's views; to situate them within their scientific and historical-cultural contexts; and, though to a lesser degree, to assess their *Nachleben* today. What dimensions of Christianity and the ancient mystery cults were compared and how? How were similarities and dissimilarities explained? What were the extra-scientific stakes of these often highly polemical comparative debates? Our volume unites inter-

2 See his letter to his German teacher Hermann Usener on the first page of this volume. For the comparative ideas of Hermann Usener, see *infra* section 3 of this introduction, and the chapter by Francesco Massa (*passim*).

3 For Cumont's importance to Late Antiquity studies see Praet 2021.

4 On this narrative see the first chapter by Danny Praet and Annelies Lannoy, which is devoted entirely to Cumont's views.

5 Cumont's reluctance has been repeatedly observed in the past decades, see, among many other, for instance Bonnet-Van Haepere 2006, XVI and *passim*; Gordon 2013, 89; Praet 2014, 285.

6 Or, alternatively, *Histoire des religions*, *Religionsgeschichte*, *Storia delle religioni*. Each of these names came with its own methodological and ideological connotations depending on their specific national setting. We will return to this point in section 1 of this introduction. For a synthesis of these scientific developments in Western-Europe see the excellent overview in Stausberg 2007 and 2016.

national scholars from a wide array of disciplinary backgrounds, whose contributions investigate the comparative ideas of Cumont in three parts. In part I Praet-Lannoy, Dirven and Massa study the work of Cumont from different angles. In part II, Klostergaard Petersen, Kalospyros, Talar, Amsler, Schreiber, and Spineto discuss Cumont in relation to the work of key contemporaries, and part III explores the legacy of his ideas today with contributions by Borgeaud and Mastrocinque.

In the largest first and second parts of this volume, the focus is on understanding the theories of Cumont and of pivotal contemporaries by the scientific standards of their own time and within their own historical-cultural contexts. The contributions of Philippe Borgeaud and Attilio Mastrocinque in the third section start from the theses advanced by Cumont and contemporaries to develop new approaches to a question which today may have lost the topical importance it had in Cumont's time, but has never stopped fascinating.

In this introduction, we will first delineate this volume's scope and explain why it is, exactly, that Cumont's views deserve the close attention they are given here (section 1). This is followed by a brief introduction to the historical-cultural context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century debates (section 2), and an overview of the scientific stakes with summaries of the individual chapters (section 3).<sup>7</sup> This volume's aim is explicitly not to offer an exhaustive account of these widely ramified debates. Its main focus is on Cumont; his ideas constitute the implicit and explicit connecting threads between all contributions.

## **1. Cumont's Comparative Historiography of Christianity: Setting the Frame**

### *Religions orientales and mystères; Religions orientales as mystères*

One of the research axes of this volume is to determine whether or not ancient Christianity was conceived of as a *religion orientale* or oriental mystery cult by Cumont and his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> For the reader who may perhaps be less familiar with the quintessential Cumontian concept of the *religions orientales*, we should first clarify its meaning.

According to Cumont's long-lived thesis, the oriental religions constituted a more or less homogeneous group of religions which gained wide popularity in the Roman West under the late Republic and especially during the Imperial period. They had their individual origins in the ancient Near-East and Middle East: both in regions which would become part of the Roman Empire like Asia-Minor, Egypt and Syria, and out-

7 Our own first chapter in this volume is dedicated to determining Franz Cumont's own position in them.

8 In what follows we will use the English equivalent: oriental religion.

side the Roman world because Cumont looked to Persia for the early origins of the mysteries of Mithras. Cumont thus gave an idiosyncratic interpretation to the existing concept of oriental religion, which usually indicated traditions from the Far-East like Hinduism and Buddhism, and sometimes also Islam. In the introduction to his *Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* Cumont explained that if one were to compare Christianity to the totally different religions of China or India, one would conclude that it was much closer to his list of oriental religions and essentially of the same type.<sup>9</sup> For reasons, and in circumstances he did not always fully explain, he was convinced that all of these religions had adopted the form of a mystery religion before entering the West.<sup>10</sup> For Cumont this shared mystery format was an important component of their overall homogeneity.

In the course of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of mystery religion or simply “mystery”, commonly translated in French as *religion à mystère* or *mystère*, acquired a more or less circumscribed set of historiographical meanings.<sup>11</sup> The (Greek and Eastern) cults designated as such, were often described by the following characteristics. Contemporary researchers will no longer subscribe to any or all of these characteristics, but this is the paradigm in which Cumont worked and to which he contributed:

1. In contrast to the public and official religions of the ancient Mediterranean, central aspects of the mystery religions were only open to the initiates and these were bound by secrecy.

9 On the history of the term, see Scheerlinck 2013a; Stroumsa 2021. On Cumont’s own interpretation: Pailler 1989 and 1999. The comparison with China or India in the preface to his *Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*: Cumont 2006, 13.

10 Cumont 2006, 305. On this topic see also Bonnet-Van Haepere 2006, XLII–XLIII. Cumont’s explanations were not always consistent and may have changed over time. References to Cumont’s work in this introduction are always to the re-editions that were published as part of the Bibliotheca Cumontiana project (when available). On this international re-edition project of Cumont’s selected monographs and scripta minora, along with important unpublished material, see <http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=BICU> and the website of the Academia Belgica: <https://www.academiabelgica.it/index.php/progetti-di-ricerca?language=nl>.

11 In German mainly *Mysterienreligionen*. For the history of the modern terminology see Bremmer 2014, ix. For detailed surveys of the history of scholarship on the ancient mystery cults which include a wealth of material for the older bibliography, see: Casadio 2006; Casadio-Johnston 2009b; Auffarth 2013; Bremmer 2014; Belayche-Massa 2021a, 17–25. An *Oxford Handbook of the Ancient Mystery Cults* including different historiographical chapters is currently in preparation by Hugh Bowden and Aikaterini Iliana-Rassia (expected for 2024). For the complex and diversified meanings of the Greek term *mustèria* and related terms such as *teletè* and *orgia* in Antiquity one could consult different encyclopedias and reference-works specialized on religion which we could not possibly all list here. See, e.g., Berner 1998; Cancik 1998; Bowden 2010; Auffarth 2013; Borgeaud 2013; Massa 2016; Belayche-Massa 2021a. Bornkamm 1942 and Riedweg 1987 also remain highly useful for their comparative perspectives on Greek, Jewish, and Christian uses of mystery terminology.

2. During and after the initiation rites, not only the esoteric rites but also some doctrinal contents were gradually revealed.
3. The mysteries contained ritual enactments of the myth of the mystery god(s).<sup>12</sup>
4. The decision to become initiated was the personal choice of the individual worshipper. Unlike the public and official religions which served national-collective interests, the mystery religions had universal aspirations and meaning, but centered on individualistic interests of salvation.
5. The initiates typically became part of a new social entity: they constituted tight *Mysteriengemeinde*.<sup>13</sup>
6. The initiation rites produced a strong emotional experience and brought about a deeply regenerating change within the identity of the worshipper.
7. The gods of the mysteries were savior gods who had suffered, died, or undergone some trying ordeal, but in the end triumphed over death or suffering.
8. The initiates were promised a blissful afterlife through some (ritual and/or contemplative) form of personal closeness to the divine.
9. The central mystery doctrines on the immortality of the soul had mystical properties.

This set of characteristics was more or less generally accepted in and through a large series of publications which were published in Cumont's time. These include those of Cumont himself, but also those of Gustav Anrich, James G. Frazer, Wilhelm Bousset, Richard Reitzenstein, Karel H. E. de Jong, to mention only a few scholars.<sup>14</sup> The 1910s and 1920s later gave rise to a series of publications with a new, often more structuralist approach, including those of Alfred Loisy and especially Raffaele Pettazzoni. The latter took an important step in the theorization of the ancient mystery cult as a cross-cultural religious taxonomy with parallels outside of the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> These scholars struggled with often very different theoretical premises and historical questions. They all had different religious and ideological backgrounds and the question whether ancient Christianity had been yes or no a mystery religion was an outspoken concern for some scholars, whereas others discussed the problem in an oblique way.

12 See the interesting article of Graf 2003 on initiation with a rich historiographical account of scholarship.

13 This term *Mysteriengemeinde* remains closely associated to the work of Richard Reitzenstein. See chapter 5 by Nicholas Kalospyros.

14 Important publications by these scholars for example include: Anrich 1894; Frazer 1890 (1900<sup>2</sup> and 1906–1915<sup>3</sup>); Bousset 1907; de Jong 1909; Reitzenstein 1910. Several of these characteristics were already attacked in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance by the Dominican Marie-Joseph Lagrange (e.g. Lagrange 1919b) who nevertheless mainly had apologetic reasons for criticizing the pagan myth of the dying and resurrecting god.

15 For Loisy, see section 2 and 3 of this introduction and the chapter of Frédéric Amsler. For Pettazzoni, see the chapter by Natale Spineto in this volume. For a recent comparative cross-cultural perspective on mystery phenomena, see the contributions to Philonenko-Lehmann-Pernot 2017.

A very important aspect of the controversy was to decide, if one allowed some similarities, at what stage and from which source or sources such similarities had arisen.

Within the context of this volume, we may distinguish two types of scholars. On the one hand, scholars like Cumont (chapter 1–3), Hermann Gunkel (chapter 4), Richard Reitzenstein (chapter 5), or Vittorio Macchioro (chapter 9), who focused on the relation between Christianity and the Greek (Macchioro), oriental (Cumont) or more particularly Hellenistic (Gunkel and Reitzenstein) mysteries,<sup>16</sup> and mostly developed historical and diffusionist interpretations. On the other hand, there are scholars such as Eugène Goblet d'Alviella (chapter 8) or Raffaele Pettazzoni (chapter 9) who studied *all* alleged mysteries and (also) had phenomenological concerns.<sup>17</sup> While the former developed genealogical explanations based on the imitations and assimilations that allegedly took place when Christianity and the mysteries met, the latter also adopted anthropological methods and especially focused on defining the identity markers of the mystery as a type of religion, often asserting that the mysteries similarly originated independently within the national religions because their histories follow similar lines of development. We will return to this distinction when introducing the major tendencies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century *Forschung* in section 3.

As important as the mystery concept was to Cumont's understanding of the oriental religions, the prominence of the latter term in his work seems to imply that for him, their primary features as a distinct category of religion derived from their *oriental*-ness. Cumont paid substantial attention to the peculiarities of each oriental religion (e.g. Phrygian, Egyptian, Syrian or Persian), which he explained through the specific ethnic and cultural characteristics of the Phrygian, Egyptian, Syrian or Persian peoples. But one of the greatest novelties of his work resided in his argument that these religions shared an important set of characteristics due to their joint *oriental* roots, and that these clearly and (mainly) positively distinguished them from "traditional" *Western-Roman* paganism.<sup>18</sup> While a phenomenological historian of religions like Pettazzoni was concerned with studying the typological differences between national religions and mysteries in all ancient religious cultures, Cumont's typology of the oriental re-

16 For Reitzenstein (and probably also Gunkel) all mysteries found their origin in the Hellenistic Orient, hence his term *Hellenistische Mysterienreligionen*, while Cumont more carefully differentiated the origin of the individual oriental mysteries, some of which, he argued, definitely went back to the pre-Hellenistic era. On this question, and on Cumont's change of opinion in 1913 (NB shortly after the publication of Reitzenstein's work) see chapter 1.

17 On the distinction between these two approaches see also Casadio-Johnston 2009b, 2.

18 In this regard, Cumont's insistence on a general oriental origin significantly differed from Renan's largely Semitic understanding of the oriental context. On this question see Stroumsa 2021, 242–243, and *infra* section 2.

ligions was grounded in a different hermeneutical distinction: the one between the Orient and the Occident.<sup>19</sup>

The primary difference between traditional Roman paganism and the oriental religions was, in Cumont's view, that the latter were able to fully satisfy the multifarious spiritual needs of the worshippers.<sup>20</sup> He listed the following aspects which interacted and reinforced each other. The thrilling exotic rites had a greater emotional appeal than the traditional rites which Cumont characterized as cold and formalistic. The myths and characters of the gods involved in the oriental religions, mourning for someone lost, rejoicing for someone restored, were easier to relate to from a psychological and emotional point of view. The doctrines about astral immortality of the human soul were reassuring and combined the psychological and emotional advantages with a scientific worldview. The esoteric theology of the Chaldeans was combined with Greek philosophy and science before it came to the West and this was for Cumont the lasting contribution of Babylonian astrology and religion, which also meant he stressed the positive Semitic input in the new religious synthesis.<sup>21</sup> This intellectual superiority was combined with the moral requirements for astral immortality: the high standards of ethical behavior prescribed to the initiates, were mainly ascribed by Cumont to Mazdaean influence.<sup>22</sup> The oriental mysteries all had their specific characteristics but these were common factors of their success. Cumont believed that, by the end of Antiquity, they were all preaching the same message. And, interestingly, these qualities, such as for instance Persian morality, were not only qualities of the oriental mysteries, but also of the national public Mazdaeism of ancient Persia, from which Cumont believed the cult of Mithras derived.

Overall, it remains difficult to ascertain whether the concepts of "mystery" and "oriental religion" fully or only partially coalesced for Cumont.<sup>23</sup> As a classicist, Cumont obviously knew the cult of Eleusis all too well, although the fact is that here, too, he saw substantial oriental influence at work. Previous scholarship by Jean-Marie Pailler and the chapter of Francesco Massa in this volume also show that his ideas changed over time. The mystery format certainly gained prominence in his conceptual understanding of the oriental religions between the first and the last, fourth edition of *Les Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (1906–1929).<sup>24</sup> A progressive conflation of

19 See also *infra* section 2 of this introduction, and chapter 1.

20 The specific needs of the individual worshipper depended mostly on the personal social and intellectual background of the initiates according to Cumont.

21 In stating that this fundamental idea was Babylonian, Cumont opposed the "Aryan" agendas of both Reitzenstein and Wilhelm Bousset who insisted on its Persian origins. On the "Aryan-Semitic" question, see *infra*, section 2 of this introduction.

22 But sometimes also through Jewish influence, see Praet 2013.

23 In a somewhat similar vein, we should point attention to Reitzenstein's *Mysterienreligionen*, which was a term almost always combined with the qualification of *Hellenistisch*.

24 Pailler 1989 and 1999.

the concepts of “oriental religion” and “mystery” may well have been one of the reasons why he included an appendix of the cult of Bacchus in the fourth edition of 1929, now adducing that this cult was in fact semi-oriental.<sup>25</sup>

It was especially from the 1970s onwards that many of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas on the ancient mystery cults and the oriental religions were broadly questioned and revised.<sup>26</sup> Since Richard Gordon’s deconstruction of the Cumontian ideas on Mithras,<sup>27</sup> a great many number of scholars have pointed out that the “oriental” cults which flourished in the Roman Empire were not that oriental at all.<sup>28</sup> Scholars have also avoided using the word “religion”. The impressive EPRO-series edited by Maarten J. Vermaseren held on to the terminology of “religions orientales” to about five years after the demise of its general editor but has since changed its name and scope.<sup>29</sup> Since the seminal essay of Walter Burkert (1987), the common early 20<sup>th</sup> century term “mystery religion” has been replaced by that of “mystery cult”. When Robert Turcan published the first edition of his synthesis in 1989 which was intended to update Cumont’s volume, he consciously chose the title: *Les Cultes orientaux dans le monde romain*.<sup>30</sup> Today’s *communis opinio* is that these cults were not religions functioning outside of Greco-Roman polytheism, but an integral part of that system. Many of the characteristics which 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars assigned to the ancient mystery cults have moreover been dismissed as the result of all too Christian interpretations of ancient polytheistic religion, which is precisely one of the reasons for the extraordinary amount of similarities that were “discovered” at that time.<sup>31</sup> These especially concerned the alleged

25 See *infra* the chapter by Massa.

26 Bibliography on these topics is vast. For evaluations of Cumont’s category of the “oriental religions” see, e.g., contributions to Bonnet-Rüpke-Scarpi 2006; Bonnet-Van Haepere 2006; the contributions to the ARG (issue of 2006) dossier “Les ‘religions orientales’: approches historiographiques / Die ‘orientalischen Religionen’ im Lichte der Forschungsgeschichte; Auffarth 2007 and 2008; contributions to Bonnet-Pirenne-Delforge-Praet 2009; Belayche-Mastrocinque 2013. For overviews of modern approaches to the ancient mystery cults, especially since Walter Burkert’s seminal work, see, e.g., Beck 2004 (in follow-up on Beck 1984); Casadio 2006; Casadio-Johnston 2009b; Bremmer 2014; Belayche-Massa 2016, and most recently Belayche-Massa 2021a.

27 See, e.g., Gordon 1975, although Belayche-Mastrocinque 2013, LXXV underlines that Gordon was not the first to do so. Together with Roger Beck, Walter Burkert, Robert Turcan, and Ramsay MacMullen, Gordon has nevertheless been one of the most important inaugurators of a new era of research on the “oriental” cults.

28 At around the same time, Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) identified the Western ethnocentric misconceptions of the Orient. We will return to this point in section 2.

29 The new series continued the numbers of the EPRO-series, but the volume published by Tamara M. Green, *The City of the Moon God. Religious Traditions of Harran*. RGRW 114 (Brill: Leiden, 1992) clearly illustrates the shift in paradigm. Bricault-Bonnet 2013 is based on a conference commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of the series. See Praet 2021: 446–449 for a short appendix on Vermaseren and EPRO, with further references.

30 Turcan 2004 is an updated edition.

31 In our third section we will return to the state of the art on the relation between the mystery cults and Christianity. For now, we focus on modern criticisms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century historiography of the ancient mystery cults.

primacy of theology and doctrine over rituals, the conception of the Christ-like dying and resurrecting savior gods, the focus on the immortality of the soul and a blissful afterlife, and the idea of a mystery community.<sup>32</sup> In the last decade, several scholars have furthermore questioned whether the cults typically qualified as mystery cults may be considered a homogeneous, *sui generis* group of cults, or rather were part of a wider phenomenon of *Mysterisierung*.<sup>33</sup> These modern interpretations are not the primary focus of this volume, but they do show us the importance of conceptual clarity when entering this complex research domain. In the historiographical contributions to this volume, the terms oriental religion, mystery religion, mystery, etc. will be used with their above-mentioned, 19<sup>th</sup> and early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century connotations.

### The Emergence of *Histoire des religions*

Franz Cumont had a vast historiographical outlook on Antiquity, which was extraordinary in his own time, and has become even more so in our present times of disciplinary compartmentalization.<sup>34</sup> His research of the manifold interdependencies between the East and the Roman West marked a major innovation in the study of Antiquity, as the Belgian scholar united the largely separated fields of oriental studies and classical philology.<sup>35</sup> But this was not the only boundary his work crossed. Until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the history of Christianity was almost exclusively the subject of study (and battlefield) of Catholic and Protestant theologians.<sup>36</sup> Classical scholars who studied the ancient mysteries mostly refrained from discussing Christianity.<sup>37</sup> From the sec-

32 Rives 2010 provides an excellent account of past scholarship on these issues.

33 On this matter see Auffarth 2013 who points to a heterogeneous process of “mysterization” pervading religion, philosophy, medicine starting from the early Empire. More recently see Belayche-Massa-Hoffmann 2021. Bremmer 2014, xii, does offer a list of general characteristics which qualify mystery cults as a distinct group.

34 The breadth and depth of his research interests can easily be derived from his extensive bibliography, available online here: <https://www.cumont.ugent.be/en/bibliography>. See also the different thematic volumes within the scripta minora series of the Bibliotheca Cumontiana (editor in chief: Danny Praet): *Astrologie* (Cumont 2015); *Manichéisme* (Cumont 2017), *Doura-Europos* (Cumont 2020); other volumes currently in preparation include: *Philosophie*; *Religions orientales et cultes à mystères*; *Religions orientales et la transformation du paganisme*; *Christianisme et Judaïsme*.

35 Cumont’s open-minded view of classical philology as a discipline which ought to move beyond the traditional study of classical Athens and Rome – both in geographical and chronological terms – certainly was indebted to important German predecessors such as Friedrich Creuzer and his own teacher Hermann Usener. On this German scholarship, see Marchand 2009, especially 66 and following. For Cumont, see Scheerlinck 2013a.

36 Its relation to the ancient mystery cults – if studied at all – was discussed by these theologians within their respective apologetic frameworks. We will return to the apologetic and denominational contexts of the debate in sections 2 and 3 of this introduction.

37 For the scholarship that preceded the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see the historiographical account of Smith 1990, 20–21 and Bremmer 2014, 143–147. Aside from pre-critical scholarly approaches, the mystery cults

ond half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, this division of labor was revised. Relations between ancient Judaism, early Christianity, and the religions of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Levant gradually became the converged areas of historical inquiry of liberal theologians, classicists, and orientalists.<sup>38</sup> At about the same time, the development of new comparative methods which sought to replace the traditional theological study of Christianity and to dethrone Christianity as a privileged topic of inquiry, eventually led to important disciplinary shifts within academic institutions across Europe. Starting from the 1870s, the academic study of religion became an independent academic discipline at various European universities. True to the historical and comparative research aims, the newly created chairs often carried the name *history of religions*, or alternatively, *histoire des religions*, *storia delle religioni*, *Religionsgeschichte*.<sup>39</sup> Eugène Goblet d'Alviella was the first to hold such a chair at a Belgian university as the chapter by Jean-Philippe Schreiber will show.

At the State University of Ghent where Cumont worked, there was no such department. He had studied classics and history in Ghent and at different universities in Germany, Austria, and France which is one of the possible reasons why his work was so wide in scope. His oeuvre should be understood as both the product of and a major contribution to this new discipline, based as it was on profound historical inquiry and cross-cultural comparison. In his international bestseller *Les Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (henceforth abbreviated as *RO*), he consecutively discussed and compared the oriental religions from Asia-Minor, Egypt, Syria, and Persia on their journey to the Roman West, followed by an account of the wide influence of oriental

have also attracted wide attention in the long history of Western esotericism. See, e.g., the contributions to Assmann-Ebeling 2011 for esoteric interest in the Egyptian mysteries. These esoteric interpretations are beyond the purview of this volume. See, however, chapter 8 on the interpretations of the Belgian historian of religions and freemason Eugène Goblet d'Alviella, which shows the boundaries between his scholarly and esoteric interests were blurred.

38 For the German orientalist interest in Christianity, see Marchand 2009, 252–291. For Cumont, and other classical scholars like Albrecht Dieterich, Richard Reitzenstein or Paul Wendland, who investigated the links between ancient Christianity, the Orient and classical Greco-Roman Antiquity, we should definitely point to the pioneering role of Hermann Usener who was the teacher of this new generation of historians of religions. See Mette 1979–80 and Kany 2004 for the “Schule” of Usener. See also Bremmer 1990 for Usener.

39 Although these same names may suggest differently, there were wide ideological differences from one national setting to another. To give only two examples: in France the discipline of *histoire des religions* served strong anticlerical purposes and was intended to be strictly non-theological (even if its first representatives were Protestants), while the German term *Religionsgeschichte* carries explicit liberal-Protestant meaning. General accounts of the genesis of the academic study of religion may be found in, e.g., Waardenburg 1973; Capps 1995; Molendijk-Pels 1998; Kippenberg 2002; Auffarth-Mohr 2006; Wiegers 2002; Stausberg 2007 and 2016. For specific national settings, see, e.g., Borgeaud 2006 (Switzerland); Molendijk 2005 (the Netherlands); Laplanche 1999 and Lannoy 2020 (France); Schreiber 2012 (Belgium); Stausberg 2012 (Germany); Wheeler-Barclay 2010 (UK); Mazza-Spineto 2014 (Italy).

magic and astrology in imperial Rome.<sup>40</sup> In the fourth edition of 1929, as we have seen, he added an appendix on the cult of Bacchus to this selection. But just as strange as this later addition, is the absence of chapters specifically devoted to Judaism and Christianity, those two other important religions with Eastern roots, if not the most important ones for later Western-European history and for Cumont's avowed interest in explaining "the end of paganism".

This absence is especially remarkable when one compares Cumont's work to that of other historians of religions like Ernest Renan, Richard Reitzenstein, Alfred Loisy, or Raffaele Pettazzoni who designed new taxonomies of religion precisely in order to compare Christianity and Judaism to other religions more freely and comprehensively.<sup>41</sup> For many contemporary historians of religions, the question was no longer, or no longer exclusively, what particular ritual or belief could have been exchanged between Christianity, Judaism, and their Eastern or Greco-Roman surroundings. The question increasingly became whether or not Christianity in its entirety – meaning *all* of its rites and beliefs – represented the same type of religion as another religion of choice. This was often approached from a specific view on the evolution of religious forms and studied from the point of view of one or more religions which had emerged in the course of the history of religions and which showed a number of resemblances.<sup>42</sup> Although Cumont's comprehensive typology of the oriental religions offered an innovative taxonomy for comparing early Christianity, Judaism, and the mystery cults, it was mainly others who would elaborate on the comparative gains made in his work.

40 For the philosophical foundations of the book's structure see chapter 1 by Danny Praet and Annelies Lannoy.

41 See the chapter of Natale Spineto for the innovative viewpoint of Raffaele Pettazzoni's *Misteri*, and that of Nicholas Kalospyros for Reitzenstein's *Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*. For Renan's *oriental religions*, and his conceptual distinction between Semitic and Aryan religions, see the enormous bibliography most recently listed in Stroumsa 2021, 111–130, and *infra*, section 2. For a comparison of Cumont and Renan on this issue, see Praet 2013.

42 Under the influence of the new anthropological paradigms that saw daylight in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the comparative scope moreover widened to also include religions of regions and timeframes other than the ancient Mediterranean, such as, e. g., the "primitive" cults of 19<sup>th</sup> century indigenous peoples, although the epistemological value of these new comparative methods also met with severe criticism by Cumont and others. On this matter see Strenski 1998; Laplanche 1999; Krech 2000, among others.