The Invention of World Religions
Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism

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To the memory of Walter H. Capps (1934–1997)


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## Contents

**Preface** ix  
**Introduction** 1  
1 World Religions in the Academy Today 2  
2 The Discourse on Religion as a Discourse of Othering 14  
3 A Synoptic Overview 21  
4 Writing History in the Age of Theory: A Brief Discourse on Method 29  

**PART 1**  
Chapter 1 "The Religions of the World" before "World Religions" 37  
  1 "World Religions" in the Age of World Wars 37  
  2 Early Modern Taxonomy, or the Order of Nations 46  
  3 Before the Birth of Science 64  

Chapter 2 The Legacy of Comparative Theology 72  
  1 Two Pioneers: Frederick Denison Maurice and James Freeman Clarke 75  
  2 Strategies for Representation 79  
  3 A Critic: Charles Hardwick 86  
  4 The Variety of Parascientific Comparativism 95  

**PART 2**  
Chapter 3 The Birth Trauma of World Religions 107  
Chapter 4 Buddhism, a World Religion 121  
  1 Before Buddhism 122  
  2 Europe Discovers Buddhism 125  
  3 Buddhism and the Future of Europe 138  

Chapter 5 Philology and the Discovery of a Fissure in the European Past 147  
  1 The Discovery of the Indo-European Past 149  
  2 The Birth of Comparative Grammar 156  
  3 The Supremacy of Inflection 163  
  4 The Essential Nature of the Semitic: Ernest Renan 171
Preface

A few steps around the corner from the Pantheon, in the heart of Rome, one comes upon a small square, typically crowded with parked cars during the day. At the center of Piazza Minerva stands a curious monument, a charming stone statue of a smiling elephant carrying an obelisk on its back, tilting its head to the side and playfully lifting its trunk, as if in greeting. As with all the pagan relics of conspicuous size erected in the city, the obelisk—not a very tall one by comparison—is crowned with a cross, and in this fashion the monument graces the approach to the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, or as one local guidebook translates it, Our Lady on Top of Minerva. The church, indeed, was originally built in the eighth century on the ruins of a temple of Minerva, and the obelisk, which was discovered in 1665 in the garden of the Dominican monastery attached to the church, is said to have belonged to a temple of Isis that once stood nearby. The elephant, a somewhat diminutive creature with demure aspect, smaller ears, and stubby tusks, suggests that it could be of an Asian variety, and its ornate saddle reminds one of a royal howdah from India.

To be sure, what the image of an elephant conveyed or what “India” meant to the contemporary observer when the monument was erected in 1667 could not have been quite the same as what such things signify to us today. Nor is it likely—given that this was nearly two centuries before Champollion deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphics—that either the artist, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, or Pope Alexander VII, who commissioned the work, knew what the inscription on the obelisk had to relate, namely, certain exploits of Apries (known in the Hebrew Bible as Hophrah), a pharaoh in the sixth century B.C.E. and an ally of Zedekiah, king of Judah, against Nebuchadnezzar. Today, all this intelligence is readily available to anyone who consults the Blue Guide, the vade mecum of post-Victorian British travelers, and still the tour book of choice for the learned. For this, we owe much to the scholars of the nineteenth century, as well as to their contemporaries’ sudden passion for travel and sightseeing.

1. The culmination of this scholarship may be observed in William S. Heckscher’s learned article published in the mid-twentieth century, “Bernini’s Elephant and Obelisk” (1947).
Introduction

Poor grammar, fuzzy semantics, or uncertain orthography can never stop a phrase from gaining currency if there is enough practical demand for it in the spirit of the times. In our times, the term "world religions" testifies to this general truth. This imperfectly wrought, decidedly ambiguous phrase—sometimes hyphenated, most often not, sometimes as a possessive ("world's religions"), other times not—is as commonplace as any subject heading in the usual docket of things to be learned in school. College students with no previous instruction on the subject seem to understand what it is when they decide to enroll in a course by that name. Any bookstore clerk can direct the customer to the appropriate shelves when inquired about a title in that category. Everybody, in effect, seems to know what "world religions" means, more or less, that is to say, generally, vaguely.

What this familiarity belies, however, is a rather monumental assumption that is as pervasive as it is unexamined, namely, that religion is a universal, or at least ubiquitous, phenomenon to be found anywhere in the world at any time in history, albeit in a wide variety of forms and with different degrees of prevalence and importance. We seem to imagine ourselves living in a world mapped—though not very neatly—in terms of so many varieties of religion, which sometimes overlap, converge, and syncretize and often conflict with one another. It is presumed, moreover, that religion is one of the most significant—possibly the most significant—factor characterizing each individual society, and that this is particularly true in "premodern" or otherwise non-Western societies. Broadly speaking, the more "traditional" the society, the greater the role religion plays within it—or so we presume, regardless of how much or how little we happen to know about the society in question or about its supposed tradition.

To be sure, these are mostly precritical, unreflected assumptions on the order of street-corner opinions, but when it comes to the subject of religion, it appears that the scholarly world is situated hardly above street level. In the social sciences and humanities alike, "religion" as a category has been left
largely unhistoricized, essentialized, and tacitly presumed immune or inherently resistant to critical analysis. The reasons for this failing on the part of the academy, this general lack of analytic interest, and the obstinate opacity of the subject of religion, are no doubt many and complex. But the complexity may begin to yield to critical pressure if we are to subject this discursive formation as a whole to a different kind of scrutiny, a sustained and somewhat sinuous historical analysis.

The central focus of the present study is the period in which the protean notion of "religion"—which had not been, until the eighteenth century, a particularly serviceable idea, at least for the purposes we employ it today—came to acquire the kind of overwhelming sense of objective reality, concrete facticity, and utter self-evidence that now holds us in its sway. As a result of this development, it has come to seem to us entirely gratuitous, if not to say quixotic, to challenge the reality of religion or to question those familiar truisms that are freely circulated about this reality.

1. World Religions in the Academy Today

A casual glance at numerous textbooks designed for classroom use today readily testifies to the following general consensus. "World religions," or major religions of the world, almost invariably include Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism, and also typically count among their number Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto (though these may be variously grouped together or conflated as Chinese, Japanese, or East Asian religions). Somewhat less typically but still very frequently included are Zoroastrianism (Parsee or Parsiism), Jainism, and Sikhism.1

These so-called great religions of the world—though what makes them "great" remains unclear—are often arranged by means of one or the other of various systems of classification, with binary, tripartite, or even more multi-facicious divisions. What these systems do, regardless of the variation, is to distinguish the West from the rest, even though the distinction is usually effected in more complicated ways than the still frequently used, easy language of "East and West."2

1. Very broadly speaking, if we compare the more recent versions of world religions books with the older versions in the early decades of the twentieth century, it appears that Sikhism is nowadays more frequently included, whereas Taoism and Confucianism are occasionally included, Shinto and Jainism less frequently itemized and treated on their own, and Zoroastrianism, even less. The addition of Bahai is not uncommon. With regard to the inclusion of various tribal-scale religions (African, Native American, etc.), see below.

2. As we shall see, the tripartite demarcation was more often favored by those writers who were informed by philology, with a result that the West-and-rest distinction was palpably more complicated. Yet even those expert taxonomists at times freely availed themselves of the language of the East and West binary, despite the apparent incongruity.

3. By explicitly rendering the foundational dichotomy as "the West and the rest," Johannes Fabian, in his Time and Other (1983), exposes the inherent asymmetry and unilateralism of the construction of the West's relation to the non-West.

4. See categories in R. C. Zaehner, ed., The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Faiths (1959). In this binary scheme of things, the position of Islam (and sometimes Zoroastrianism) has been somewhat ambiguous. Nonetheless, the differential logic itself, which allows the demarcation of the Western domain from the rest, has proven remarkably persistent and impervious to any complication by factual details.
place marker attached (e.g., Native American, Siberian, Aboriginal Australian). This category in its entirety used to be uniformly called “primitive religions” in the earlier days, but more recently it has been variously termed “primal,” “pre-literate,” “tribal,” or even “basic religions.” The restless shifting of appellations may be a measure of the discomfort felt by contemporary scholars of religion in their effort not to appear condescending to those peoples who used to be referred to as savages.

Despite these incessant circumlocutions and the fine nuancing of the classificatory systems, there seems to be some underlying logic silently at work in all variations, and the intent of differentiation probably has not changed appreciably. At its simplest and most transparent, this logic implies that the great civilizations of the past and present divide into two: venerable East on the one hand and progressive West on the other. They both have been called “historical,” but implicitly in different senses. In a word, the East preserves history, the West creates history. In contradistinction from both East and West, the tertiary group of minor religions has been considered lacking in history, or at least lacking in written history, hence its designation as preliterate. A corollary assumption is that the peoples of small-scale tribal societies may likely possess an unusually tenacious historical memory, but no historical consciousness. On the strength of this assumption, these societies are relegated to a position in some sense before history or at the very beginning of history, hence, primal. This loose but deep association of the primitive and the prehistoric further complicates the tertiary category. The ancient and extinct traditions are conflated with the contemporary savage or tribal traditions, often treated at the outset under a single rubric signifying “beginning,” “incipient,” or “elementary”; or else they are discussed in tandem, in any case separately from the great religions of the East and the West.

With these foundational categories more or less assumed in the table of contents, a typical world religions textbook opens to an actual map of the world showing an oddly irregular, often illegible, and frankly uninterpretable picture of the distribution of these religions, sometimes accompanied by a list of figures indicating the respective size of the “adherents” or “believers” that each religion supposedly claims. As a rule, both the map and the list admit to situations of “significant overlap,” that is, the situations of coexistence or intermixture of traditions that are in principle—so it is implied—distinct. This overlap inevitably compromises the clarity of representation considerably and, despite the palpable intentions of the mapmakers, no comprehensive view-at-a-glance of the religious condition of the world is to be obtained from such graphics.

In this respect, East Asia traditionally, and North America increasingly, present especially challenging situations for visual representation. These are regions known for a greater degree of coexistence, admixture, and even syncretism.

5. “Basic religions” is a designation employed by Lewis M. Hopfe in Religions of the World (1976). He subdivides the category into “Native American religions” and “African religions.” Throughout the many revised editions of his work over the course of two decades or more, this category, its designation, and its subdivisions have remained constant. The latest edition, the seventh, was posthumously revised and edited by Mark R. Woodward and published in 1998.

6. It is often assumed—most famously by Mircea Eliade—that it is only by relinquishing the traditional kind of sheer memory (active re-presencing of significant past moments) that a people enter the domain of history proper. More specifically, in Zhaker: Jewish History, Jewish Memory (1982), Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi narrates the advent of Jewish historiography in the nineteenth century as taking place in the wake of the collapse of the traditional Jewish religious imperative to remember. The ideological tow of this privileging of “historical consciousness” will be discussed in chapter 9.

7. We can observe the transmutation and repeated reappellation of the category in the case of some texts that have gone through multiple revised editions. A particularly instructive case is Ninian Smart’s The Religious Experience of Mankind. The first edition of 1969 contains a chapter, early in the book, entitled “Primitive Religions,” which is divided into a section on “prehistoric religions” and “primitive religions.” In the third edition published in 1984, the content of the original chapter was greatly expanded and came to constitute three separate chapters, respectively entitled: “Primal Religions,” “Religions of Africa,” and “Religions of the Americas and the Pacific.” In the fifth edition of 1996, the title of the volume was modified and now reads, The Religious Experimenter, and the erstwhile chapter on “primitive” or “primal” religions was renamed “Small-Scale Religions,” which contains the following sections: “The Small-Scale World,” “Mana,” “The Australian Aboriginal Experience,” “The High God,” “Tabu,” “Totemism,” “Ancestor Veneration,” “Shamans,” “Patterns of Myth,” “Prehistoric Beliefs,” and “Theories about the Genesis of Religion.”

Two years before the third edition, Smart also published an anthology, Sacred Texts of the World (1982), with Richard D. Hecht. Its first chapter is entitled “The Powerful Dead,” by which is meant, the editors explain, “a representative selection of religious documents from the great urban civilizations of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, and the Maya and Aztec of Mesoamerica” (1). The chapter also includes texts representing Zoroastrianism. After ten chapters representing the usual list of world religions from Judaism to Sikhism, we encounter a chapter called “Small-Scale Traditional Religions,” by which is meant those religions that are “usually described as ‘primitive’ religions or the religions of ‘non-literate’ peoples” (337).

8. This fact may in part account for the recent appearance of books and projects on “world religions in America.” See, for example, Jacob Neusner, ed., World Religions in America (2000),
Yet the difficulty of representation may be more than a matter of mixed population or multiple affiliations. For, in some localities, being religious—or, to put it more concretely, practicing or engaging in what has been deemed “religious”—may be related to the question of personal and group identity in a way altogether different from the one usually assumed (i.e., assumed on the basis of the Western European denominational history of recent centuries). In some cases, for that matter, religion and identity may not relate at all.

For the moment, then, let us note that a map of this sort, with a demographic chart and a table of contents that name a dozen or so “major religions of the world,” sets the stage and determines the outlook of “world religions.” Such maps, tables, and lists lend immediate facticity to the subject matter through sheer repetition and proliferation, and thus implicitly endorse as empirical and true what is in reality a particular way of conceptualizing the world, or, one might say, an idiosyncratic system of demarcating certain supposed contents of the world.

Here, then, lies a question as obvious as it is seldom asked: Whence comes this geospatial mapping of the world in religions? At its advent, did the classificatory system of world religions replace another framework for representing the relation between Christianity and all other known forms of religious belief and practice? What is the logic of “world religions” that has become so prevalent, so naturalized in our discourse that it seems as though it were no logic, no ideology at all, but a mere reflection of the way things are?

One might expect scholars of religion to have done more to guide and direct our critical attention to these pervasive assumptions about religion and religions, but in fact, this is hardly the case. There may be more than one reason for this.


9. Lately, there have been exceptions to this state of inattention, but they are exceptions that highlight the overwhelming obtuseness of the subject matter all the more. The most long-standing and celebrated of all such critical endeavors is Jonathan Z. Smith’s scholarly production, now spanning four decades, beginning with the influential collections of essays Map Is Not Territory (1978) and Imagining Religion (1982), and more recently “A Matter of Class” (1996) and “Religion, Religions, Religious” (1998). Also long-standing is Michel Desjardins’s study, from his early work, La Religion en Occident (1979), and continuing to his most recent monograph, L’Émergence des sciences de la religion (1999). In addition, Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion (1993), Bruce Lincoln, Theorizing Myth (1999), Russell McCutcheon, Manufacturing Religion (1997), and

general inattention. To begin, as some adamantly secularist scholars—who constitute a sizeable and vocal minority in the field—have observed with some displeasure, there is a higher concentration of unreconstituted religious essentialists in this department of knowledge than anywhere else in the academy. This should not come as a surprise, it is often said, given that the field is populated, and by sheer number dominated, by the representatives, pariahs, and sympathizers of various religions or, more recently, by those who may be best described as advocates and sympathizers of “religion” in general. For many of these religion-friendly scholars and teachers, the line between asserting the reality of religion(s) and asserting the legitimacy of religion(s) as a proper subject for study is at best ambiguous. Understandably, those who stand on the side of religion(s), in whatever sense of that phrase, are not likely to feel an immediate need to interrogate the category that names, for them, a reality sui generis. Second, even for those academicians who are generally wary of such naive or ambiguous religious essentialism, it appears that certain institutional circumstances of “religious studies” impart some disincentive to proceeding with critical reflection. The institutional situation of this department of knowledge may be roughly described as follows.

Daniel Dubuisson, The Western Construction of Religion (2003), variously address this matter. Especially valuable for their historically specific investigations are Peter Harrison, “Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (1990), and David Chidester, Savage Systems (1996). With regard to the history of the study of religion more generally, J. Jacques Waardenburg’s two-volume publication—one volume an annotated anthology and the other a comprehensive bibliography—entitled Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion (1973–74) made available a bird’s-eye-view of the science of religion in the early period. See also a recent important monograph by Hans G. Kippenberg, Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age (1997).

10. One of the most conspicuous assemblies of such a minority may be the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), a member organization of the International Association for the History of Religions (IATH), and also affiliate of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). NAASR began as a gathering of scholars generally disaffected by what they perceived as unduly religious (as opposed to scientific) and essentialist tenor of the AAR membership (this latter being by far the largest association of religion scholars in the world). Some representative members of NAASR have been advocates for secular and naturalistic explanations of religion (especially in the model of cognitive science), but more recently it has also become a forum for younger generations of scholars variously interested in critically examining the discursive practice about “religion,” including the scholarly discourse of Religionwissenschaft. This interest is also represented by some subgroups within the AAR—most obviously the Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion Group—and also by the Ideological Criticism Section of the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL), another important professional organization.
"World religions" has become a standard designation for an introductory survey course commonly found in the religious studies curricula of many North American and British universities, colleges, and, increasingly, secondary schools. As a rule, world religions courses in American institutions of higher education—especially in the institutions where the teaching faculty of religious studies consists of a significant number of research scholars who represent a variety of geographical areas—have been taught by those members of the faculty whose area of specialty is described as "history of religions," which in turn has been a virtual code word for any specialty other than Christianity or Judaism. Today's historian of religions is therefore typically a scholar in an Asian or some other non-Western religion, and he or she seems inclined to take this teaching assignment in stride, taking the state of affairs more as a matter of convention and practical necessity than as a matter of principle. These non-Western specialists turned teachers of "world religions" not infrequently complain that such a comprehensive treatment of the subject in one course, or even two courses, is impossibly ambitious or inexcusably simplistic, as it is bound to be too broad a survey, too flattening an analysis. It would be an unmanageable survey indeed, unless, perhaps, one begins with the scholastically untenable assumption that all religions are everywhere the same in essence, divergent and particular only in their ethnic, national, or racial expressions. Of course, this is an assumption alarmingly prevalent among the world religions books now available on the market. And it cannot be denied that this well-meaning yet uncritical assumption is what brings a large number of people into our classrooms year after year.

Today, colleges and universities in the United States, be they private or public, are inclined to regard themselves as at bottom business enterprises; they admit to being institutions that are market driven in some fundamental way. Transcribed at the level of curricular units—that is, departments and programs with their own budget allocation—market driven means first and foremost enrollment driven. This is particularly true in the humanities and many social science departments, where the percentage of outside funding in relation to the total operational cost of the unit is much smaller than most natural science departments and professional schools. Units that do not generate sufficient total student enrollment numbers in their courses in proportion to the number of faculty positions are liable to be marked as not carrying their weight and, by implication, as less fiscally responsible. In the unapologetic free market and entrepreneurial climate pervading universities and colleges in the nation, it is clear that the consistently large enrollment figure in world religions courses—as well as in derivative courses, such as courses in "Asian religions," "biblical traditions," and "religious diversity in America," to name a few—has been the single most powerful argument and justification for maintaining the steady budget line and faculty positions in the religious studies departments and programs.

Given this institutional reality, the absence of any systematic critical investigation into the discursive formation of "world religions" seems at once predictable and inexcusable. At the outset of the present investigation therefore lies this basic recognition: if a scholar of religion, of whatever kind and of whatever non-Western specialists are automatically comparativists, since they already have the "knowledge" of two religions. In recent years, as more people who are neither Christian nor Jew have come to populate the scholarly field, the new condition presents challenges to these assumptions, but the profession at large apparently has yet to be adjusted accordingly.
ever persuasion, is in fact making a living in this lately prominent domain of world religions discourse and capitalizing on its impressive market value, one cannot assume that this line of work is intellectually responsible just because it is economically viable. The present study is a proverbial small step in the direction of a critical investigation.

The principal motive force of the study, however, is neither moral outrage against professional mendacity nor an impulse to set the institutional history of the study of religion aright. Nor do I imagine myself, at the conclusion of this book, to be in the position to advocate a particular programmatic scheme or a change of course in the way the study of religion is to be done. To be sure, it is always more difficult to name what one’s objective is than to make a list of what it is not. While I acknowledge the truth of this generally, with regard to the present study more specifically, it may be marginally clarifying to note that I have always been more inquisitive about the marvelously loquacious discourse on religions—which, to my mind, is one of the most curious and conspicuous features of Western modernity—than about what this modern Western discourse insists on calling “religion itself.” I have hitherto made this discourse the primary object of my research. But if, accordingly, my own aims and strategies here seem rather deviant from the usual scholarly mission of the study of religion, I certainly cannot claim that this line of investigation is anything unique, let alone original. For, in recent decades, discourse analysis has become a regular component of any discipline in the human sciences, and the field awkwardly known as religious studies is no exception in this regard.

Today, we understand the term “world religions” to be more or less equivalent to “religions of the world,” which is to say major religions, that is, those conspicuous-enough religions distinctly and properly identified as now existing in the world. But the history of its usage in this general sense, in any typographic variation—“world religions,” “world-religions,” or “world’s religions”—is vexingly obscure. It is not immediately obvious when the term came into use, or in what sense. If one looks into instances of what appears to be early use of the term roughly consistent with our contemporary meaning, which seems to have occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century, there is nothing to suggest that the phrase was patently new or expected to be unfamiliar to the reader. Rather, “world religions” makes its appearance without ceremony, without explanation, and seemingly without a history. Typically, in those early texts purporting to treat all the major forms of religion to be found in the world, the author either has no use for the term or else takes it completely for granted. In either case, no one bothers to index the term, let alone define it.

The situation may suggest that the history of the idea of world religions as we understand it today, on the one hand, and the history of the term itself, on the other, have had separate lines of descent. To be sure, there is nothing to warrant an outright presumption that the relevant history of the term/concept is conveniently separable into two such neat halves, the halves that in due course came to meet and intertwine. The actual history in fact seems to be considerably more disorderly, confluent, and multifarious. This more complicated history explains the particular mode of presentation employed in this book, namely, why the investigation does not proceed in an orderly chronological fashion. In short, after preliminary research into the matter, it seemed to me plausible that the discursive formation of “world religions” has been a rhizomatic growth. According to this hypothesis, much of the logic of this discourse had already taken shape underground before its appearance. Owing to the complex, highly charged prehistory, moreover, once above ground, the discourse of world religions continued to be sustained and ruled by an occult network of significance not immediately transparent. Or, to resort to another metaphor, if this discourse can be said to have developed at all, it does not seem to have been in the manner of an organic growth like the development of an oak tree from an acorn, but rather more like that other type of development that occurs in the processing lab, in which a photographic image finally appears.

All this is to suggest that the genealogy of the world religions discourse is not amenable to a linear, developmental, cumulative, or incremental narration. The relatively sudden appearance of the phrase “world religions” in its familiar sense indicates that this was an outbreak of sorts, not a gradual culmination or fruition. The advent of the discourse on world religions therefore may be finally described in analogy with the onset of a certain serious illness, an illness that is deeply systemic and already metastasized at the time of its first full manifestation. The outbreak of the discourse—that is, the actual appearance of the phrase, which brought forth a sense of utter familiarity and self-evidence—effectively marked the moment when all of its “prehistory” was suddenly

14. In a sense, I am taking rather literally the programmatic statement famously issued by Jonathan Z. Smith—though possibly with somewhat different motives and errant consequences than originally intended—at the beginning of the introduction to his Imagining Religion. In any event I am by no means the first one to follow the lead. For further discussion on the topic, see Masuzawa, “The Production of ‘Religion’ and the Task of the Scholar” (2000).
If our time, that is, the era beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century, has been preponderantly characterized by the discourse of world religions and the concomitant ideology of religious pluralism, in the nineteenth century a rather different paradigm was at work. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse on religion is reputedly dominated by an array of abstract speculative theories about the origin of religion and the subsequent stages of its development. By common accord, scholars today opine that these bygone theories of religious evolution were concocted largely on the basis of the un-warranted assumption of European hegemony, that is, on the basis of a monolithic universalist notion of history as a singular civilizing process, of which modern Europe was the triumphant vanguard and all other civilizations and non-European societies merely markers of various interim phases already surpassed by the people of European descent. It may be reasonably suggested that it was the European interest in the future of religion—or the future beyond religion, as the case may be—that motivated much of the nineteenth-century search for the origin of religion and, by the same token, the search for the most primitive forms of religion, which were presumed to be equivalent, more or less, to the ones observable in the lives of contemporary savages, lives on the brink of disappearance.

The narrative of world historical development, as envisioned by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European writers, may be simply linear, that is, the story of a gradual but steady progress from the lowest, the crudest, and the most primitive to the highest, the finest, and the most complex. Or it could be lapsarian/redemptive, starting with a state of primordial innocence, then a fall into corruption and degeneration, followed by a precarious process of recovery and maturation, eventually culminating in the fulfillment of providential destiny. If we survey comparatively Hume's Natural History of Religion (1756), Lessing's Education of the Human Race (1780), Hegel's oddly majestic Philosophy of History (1830–31), as well as works by Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, E. B. Tylor, James Frazer, and numerous other accounts of the nineteenth century, it is evident that their developmental schemata forecast the impending moment of apotheosis in varying ways. One version of the account projects rational Protestant Christianity transcending its own historically particular origins, its own cultural limitations and finitude; consequently, triumphant modern Christianity will become something else altogether than "mere" religion. Or, alternatively, a new, transcultural, objective world consciousness of science will override and vanquish the magical, religious, and metaphysical world-views hitherto dogmatically upheld by hidebound traditions; consequently, religion—and certainly any particular religion—will be obsolete and irrelevant. In either scenario, the universal principle that guarantees the unity of the world, or the world as totality, ultimately comes to prevail as a direct extension of European Christianity, or Europe as (erstwhile) Christendom. The question for us, then, amounts to this: What happened to this providential forecast and its robust universalism when the new discourse of world religions and its official doctrine of pluralism supervened?

The advent of "world religions" as a dominant discourse is generally understood to mark an explicit turn away from the nineteenth-century obsession with the primitive and the original. An implicit assumption here, often made explicit nowadays, is that it was also a turn away from the Eurocentric and Eurohegemonic conception of the world, toward a more egalitarian and lateral delineation. By converting from the evolutionary, pseudotemporal, hierarchical order to a geographic, pseudospatial, decentralized order of representation, the emergent world religions discourse appears to have liberated itself from Eurocentrism of a certain kind, since it acknowledges the actual plurality of cultures and of civilizing processes. But how does the discourse of world religions achieve this liberation? Or does it achieve it at all?

Today, the pluralist doctrine, albeit usually in a tepidly imprecise rendering, seems to have become the ruling ethos of our discourse on religion, scholarly and nonscholarly. Consequently, it takes some contrivance to stake out a position from which to regard and to question this ethos with due seriousness: On what moral or ideological grounds is the pluralist doctrine, as exemplified by the world religions discourse, predicated? What interests and concerns animate this doctrine and keep it viable? Are there elements of contradiction or even false consciousness in the way in which we are naturally led to subscribe to this doctrine? Instead of philosophically arguing for such a critical position, however, this book takes recourse in history and initiates an investigation with a set of fairly uncomplicated empirical questions posed on relatively uncontroversial grounds, namely, when, and how, this particular mode of counting and mapping religions came about.
2. The Discourse on Religion as a Discourse of Othering

Let us now consider briefly the broader historical contexts in which the pluralist discourse on religion emerged. The purpose of this section is to paint a backdrop, as it were, against which to stage the nineteenth-century episode, the main subject of the book. As with any stage setting, the backdrop presented here may seem unnaturally flat, ultimately incidental and inessential to the drama, and therefore arbitrary; yet the scenery chosen has the virtue of providing a perspective that allows us to focus on the academic context of nineteenth-century Europe.

In 1996, the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, a team of ten international scholars headed by Immanuel Wallerstein, published its report under the title Open the Social Sciences. The first chapter of the report describes the emergence, mostly in the course of the nineteenth century, of several new branches of knowledge, all pertaining to the nature of collective human life, that is, what we today refer to as the social sciences or, alternatively, the human sciences. The report begins by describing the intellectual outlook at the end of the eighteenth century. Learned Europeans of that time understood or assumed the broad-stroke division of the realm of knowledge into two domains: natural science on the one hand, and what we have been accustomed to calling "arts and letters" on the other. We are also reminded that there was a generally shared sentiment among the educated that the empirical spirit of science had incontrovertibly triumphed over speculative philosophy.

As the report further informs us, several new sciences of human social phenomena arose, more or less concertedly, representing a tertiary domain of knowledge, located between, yet distinct from, the two preexisting domains. From the beginning, these novel disciplines of the social sciences clearly leaned toward and emulated the already well-established and well-regarded natural sciences, with the difference that the objects of study were matters human and social, rather than natural phenomena. In the atmosphere of this general predilection for the scientific, history—a time-honored ideographic, as opposed to nomothetic, study of human past activities—was transformed into a scientific discipline. No longer a narration of morally and spiritually edifying tales about bygone eras, history became for the first time essentially a work of research, whose cardinal objective now was to establish certain facts about the past. Following this reconstitution and disciplinarization of history, then, the nineteenth-century soon saw the rise of three new social scientific disciplines.

In this report and elsewhere, Wallerstein has suggested that the triangulation of these nomothetic social sciences reflected nineteenth-century liberal ideology, which envisioned the workings of human society in terms of three distinct though intertwined spheres. There is political science, which studies the realm of power and the state; economics, which studies the market; and sociology, which studies what is left, that is, civil society. Because nineteenth-century intellectuals saw their own society as consisting of these spheres, this set of three sciences seemed to them entirely adequate to achieve a comprehensive understanding of modern European society. It was quite another matter, however, when it came to the study of non-European societies. As Wallerstein points out, along with these nomothetic social sciences that were proper to the West, there developed two additional disciplines specifically to study nonmodern, non-European societies. If the society in question was small and "tribal" in its scale and lacked the technology of writing, it would be an object of study for anthropology. If on the other hand, the society happened to be a large-scale, regionally dominant kingdom or empire and had a long and illustrious written tradition, it would fall under the aegis of Orientalism. In sum, in addition to the refurbished discipline of history being made more scientific, the nineteenth century saw the formation of three nomothetic disciplines to understand the West, and two more new sciences to investigate the rest.

Here, we may note that, in this picture of nineteenth-century intellectual development and disciplinary formation, what some scholars of the time had

15. In addition to the chairperson, Immanuel Wallerstein, the following individuals are listed as members of the commission established by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation of Lisbon: Calestous Juma, Evelyn Fox Keller, Jürgen Kocka, Dominique Lecourt, V. Y. Mudimbe, Kinoshishi Mushakoji, Ilya Prigogine, Peter J. Taylor, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot.


17. Because the publication is in the name of the commission, it would not be proper to equate the observation made here as that of Wallerstein alone. A few years before the publication of the Gulbenkian report, however, I heard him speak at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and on that occasion he rehearsed the same argument contained in the report, and he delivered his lecture without particular reference to the commission. Owing to these circumstances, I have taken—for the sake of convenience—the liberty of letting Wallerstein stand for the views expressed in the book.
already begun to call the “science of religion,” or Religionwissenschaft, is nowhere to be found by name. This fact, rather than discrediting or diminishing the value of Wallerstein’s schema for our purposes, actually illuminates it from behind, for, once we probe into the logic of objectification and the principle of differentiation that must have been at work in the formation of these five new disciplines just named, it becomes evident that religion was indeed an exceedingly important factor.

To examine the side of the three sciences for the West first, it stands to reason that political science, economics, and sociology should come into existence just at this time, just as politics, economy, and the social life of citizens were seemingly coming into their own, in short, just as this society was becoming secularized. According to the narrative of secularization now eminently familiar, these spheres were emerging from the control of church authority and becoming increasingly liberated from the sphere of religion. In effect, the logic here seems to be that these new sciences became viable and effective as ways of understanding European society because this society had finally reached maturity, that is, had sufficiently developed in accordance with rational principles and established itself on the basis of the rule of law, instead of on some real or imagined supernatural authority.

In contrast, every region of the nonmodern non-West was presumed to be thoroughly in the grip of religion, as all aspects of life were supposedly determined and dictated by an archaic metaphysics of the magical and the supernatural. In the case of preliterate tribal society, it was assumed that the dominant metaphysics would be a form of natural religion, that is, a moral universe saturated by supernatural and autochthonous powers, a cosmology deeply ingrained in the landscape, the cycle of seasons, and the natural rhythms of life. As we know, this type of assumption concerning tribal-scale society induced many anthropologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to concentrate their attention on what they were inclined to identify as “religion,” in order to find therein some obscure logic or arcane “prelogical” system of thought presumably governing all aspects of tribal life. For this reason, in contrast to their more recent counterparts, Victorian anthropologists were extremely keen on the subject of what they called “religious beliefs and practices.” They eagerly collected, cataloged, compared, and attempted to systematize myths, rituals, and other noteworthy customs and habits that seemed to make a given tribal society unique and peculiar and, at the same time and in another sense, very much like tribal societies found elsewhere. The presence, or rather the supposed predominance, of religious and supernatural elements was believed to mark tribal society as decisively different from modern European society.

Orientalist scholarship, in the meantime, had been discovering, editing, and translating the literary treasures of some of the most powerful nations known in history. Following the pioneering work of eminent savants and intrepid discoverers of the eighteenth century such as Thomas Hyde, Anquetil-Duperron, N. B. Halhed, and William Jones, the study of the Orient emerged as a fashionable and respectable science, or Wissenschaft, in the nineteenth century. The Orient, “the land of origin,” had been so named by the Europeans long before, rather more symbolically than precisely, and it came to encompass an enormous spread of regions, peoples, and languages ranging from North Africa to the Pacific East. As more and more archaic literary languages of the legendary nations of the East became known to the scholars of the West, and more and more of the venerable texts of these nations were amassed and cataloged in the libraries of European metropoles, this scholarship acquired a burgeoning authority over the indigenous institutions of knowledge. In the face of this formidable learning, the non-European nations—which by the end of the nineteenth century had largely come under direct European colonial control (in the case of India and Egypt) or under its overwhelming influence and intervention (as was the case in China and Japan)—no longer seemed to possess the power and the prerogative to represent their own legacy apart from this scholarship.

Like anthropology, the “science of the East” was preoccupied by the subject of religion. For Orientalists, however, the religions in question did not amount to generic supernaturalism or varieties of natural religion but instead were presumed as specific, historically unique traditions. According to nineteenth-century opinion, countless examples of primitive tribal religions might be just so many expressions of some basic and natural human propensities and behaviors in the face of the mysterious and the superhuman, whether in the form of worship, propitiation, or other observances. In contrast, each of the so-called Oriental religions was deemed singular and irreducible to a common genre. Many of these ancient Oriental religions died out, supposedly, together with the peoples and civilizations to which they respectively and uniquely belonged. But others apparently survived in altered forms and came to be recognized as “living religions,” or today’s world religions. These great religions of the past and present, unlike the tribal religions, are deemed not generic but unique and proper to themselves because, presumably, they have developed as culturally and historically particular delineations, and because they were predicated on specific defining events or acts, usually associated with certain
historical personages—founders, teachers, prophets, reformers. Furthermore, nineteenth-century Europe was generally of the opinion that, upon encountering and confronting any of these world religions, an indigenous tribal religion would eventually and inevitably dissipate or disappear, through the process of assimilation, atrophy, or banishment.

As the science of religion began the task of identifying and classifying Oriental religions in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, each of these great, historically unique religions came to be recognized as a vast and powerful metaphysical system deeply ingrained in the social fabric of a particular nation, and in the psychical predilections of its individual citizens and subjects. As such, these religions offered European scholars a powerful, far-reaching, and comprehensive categorial framework by virtue of which they could hope to explain the characteristic features of a given non-European society. In effect, according to the essential logic of this scholarship, a non-European nation of any stature was presumed to have one (or sometimes more than one) of these world religions in lieu of Christianity. Just as Christianity had shaped and disciplined the European nations for centuries, in a non-European nation, a world religion of one kind or another had been functioning as the veritable backbone of its ethos.

The difference between Christianity and other “great religions” of the world, of course, has been told in myriad ways by Europeans and by others for nearly two centuries. Some of these articulations will be examined closely in the following chapters. What may be usefully recognized provisionally at this point is that, throughout the nineteenth century, endless speculation on the differences and similarities between religions continually provided opportunities for modern Europeans to work out the problem of their own identity and to develop various conceptions of the relation between the legacy of Christianity on the one hand and modernity and rationality on the other. As we shall see in more detail presently, there was by no means a consensus as to what place Christianity was to have in the future destiny of what was then beginning to be called the European “race.” Nor was there clear agreement over the question of whether Christianity, which had been an incontrovertibly dominant institution in Europe since late Roman times, was indeed an essential and permanent component of this destiny. Closely tied to these weighty concerns was the question of the historical (or possibly congenital) relation between Christianity and Judaism, and the question of whether Jews and Judaism had a role in the future of Europe. In proximity to these concerns were issues arising from the lately prevalent notion that most of the prized institutions of the modern West (science, art, rationality, democracy, etc.) were of Greek origin; this rendered religion (Christianity) a conspicuous anomaly amid the Hellenic pedigree of the European heritage. There were also questions stemming from the newly discovered affinity and apparent fraternity between “India” and Europe.

These matters are taken up for further deliberation in later chapters. Suffice it to observe for the time being that the subject of religion and religions began to seep into visibility under these interesting circumstances: When religion came to be identified as such—that is, more or less in the same sense that we think of it today—it came to be recognized above all as something that, in the opinions of many self-consciously modern Europeans, was in the process of disappearing from their midst, or if not altogether disappearing, becoming circumscribed in such a way that it was finally discernible as a distinct, and limited, phenomenon. Meanwhile, the two new sciences pertaining to non-European worlds, anthropology and Orientalism, promoted and bolstered the presumption that this thing called “religion” still held sway over all those who were unlike them: non-Europeans, Europeans of the premodern past, and among their own contemporary neighbors, the uncivilized and uneducated bucolic populace as well as the superstitious urban poor, all of whom were something of “savages within.” For, as those enlightened moderns of the nineteenth century—as represented by those who wrote and those who read the ever-growing number of books on the subject of religion, magic, and superstitions—observed with an admixture of horror and fascination, the oppressive supernaturalism of hidebound traditions and umbrageous priestcraft continued to control and command those hapless others’ thoughts and acts in myriad idiosyncratic ways.

These general observations may in turn suggest some broad theses of the
following sort. The modern discourse on religion and religions was from the very beginning—that is to say, inherently, if also ironically—a discourse of secularization; at the same time, it was clearly a discourse of othering. My suspicion, naturally, is that some deep symmetry and affinity obtain between these two wings of the religion discourse; that they conjointly enable this discourse to do the vital work of churning the stuff of Europe’s ever-expanding epistemic domain, and of forging from that ferment an enormous apparition: the essential identity of the West.

This book does not seek to prove the above-mentioned theses conclusively. Yet it is my sense that these statements adequately summarize the overriding theme that the materials covered in the book, and the readings performed therein, continually and recurrently present.

I come now to the point of professing the nature of the present project more specifically. The principal objective is a genealogy of a particular discursive practice, namely, “world religions” as a category and as a conceptual framework initially developed in the European academy, which quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating, and totalizing a large portion of the social, cultural, and political practices observable among the inhabitants of regions elsewhere in the world. This pluralist discourse is made all the more powerful, I believe, by a corollary presumption that any broadly value-orienting, ethically inflected viewpoint must derive from a religious heritage. One of the most consequential effects of this discourse is that it spiritualizes what are material practices and turns them into expressions of something timeless and suprahistorical, which is to say, it depoliticizes them.

To put this phenomenon in a somewhat broader context, various works categorized under the rubric of colonial and postcolonial studies have made us aware of the sacralizing character of Orientalism. In view of this insight, it has become exigent that the discourse on religion(s) be viewed as an essential component, that is, as a vital operating system within the colonial discourse of Orientalism. Moreover, as the statement by Dirks cogently reminds us, there is from the beginning a symbiotic, or perhaps better, congenital relation between Orientalism in the narrow sense (scholastic subculture) and Orientalism in the more general sense (culture of colonialism). To reiterate a key point that has been proclaimed by numerous proponents of colonial and postcolonial criticism: the problem of Orientalist science is not a matter of would-be pure knowledge contaminated by ulterior political interests, or science compromised by colonialism. Our task, then, is not to cleanse and purify the science we have inherited—such efforts, in any case, always seem to end up whitewashing our own situation rather than rectifying the past—but rather it is a matter of being historical differently.

3. A Synoptic Overview

The present project is therefore an attempt to excavate, albeit in a piecemeal fashion, some of the nineteenth-century discursive practices that may be plausibly said to constitute the prehistory of the present-day world religions discourse, and to recover the half-forgotten worries, hopes, and controversies that animated these practices, which became instrumental in generating the new classificatory regime that is now ours.

Among relevant works of colonial and postcolonial studies I cite selectively the following: Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion (1993); Nicholas B. Dirks, The Hollow Crown (1987); Vicente Rafael, Contracting Colonialism (1988); Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold (1998).

The primary excavation site—which, in chronological terms, falls roughly in the parview of the "long" nineteenth century—refers to the ever-expanding discursive domain within which the new sciences of comparative philology and comparative religion emerged. It may be fairly supposed that the comparative science of religion laid grounds for academic legitimization of the pluralist discourse of world religions. In the first chapter, this domain will be circumscribed by brief sketches of its outer limits. The first section of the chapter identifies the moment when the new discourse of world religions suddenly erupted full-fledged, namely, the early decades of the twentieth century. The second section moves back in time to an earlier period and gives an account of the long reign of a premodern to early-modern system of classifying religions—or more precisely, system of ordering nations—the system that began to lose ground but survived into the first half of the nineteenth century. The final section of the chapter considers several texts published in the first half of the nineteenth century that represent the transitional or metamorphic phase, as they testify to the decline of the old taxonomic regime, and a slide into something else that was tentative, uncertain, and as yet unnamed.

The second chapter further defines the contour of the nineteenth-century comparative science of religion by examining a discursive domain that is adjacent to, but customarily excluded from, that science. This adjacent realm is known by the name "comparative theology"—in contradistinction to "comparative religion," which is roughly synonymous with "history of religions," "science of religion," or Religionswissenschaft. Comparative theology, in contrast, is generally understood to be a religiously motivated discourse. In its heyday in the latter half of the nineteenth century, comparative theology was a very popular, highly regarded, and respectable intellectual-spiritual pursuit. The proponents of the science of religion in the twentieth century and thereafter, however, have been careful to keep their own practice at a distance from this comparative theology may be an intriguing historical conundrum in its own right.

The project of comparative theology has been deemed not scientific on the grounds that it either presupposed or invariably drew the self-same conclusion as Christian theology, that Christianity was fundamentally different from all other religions, thus, in the last analysis, beyond compare. This singularity of Christianity was often expressed in a vaguely oxymoronic phrase: "uniquely universal." In the opinion of the theological comparativists, Christianity alone was truly transhistorical and transnational in its import, hence universally valid and viable at any place anytime, whereas all other religions were particular, bound and shaped by geographical, ethnic, and other local contingencies. The comparative theologians admitted that Christianity did have a temporal beginning just like any other religion, yet it alone was said not to have been determined or constrained by the accidents of its historical origin. The earliest known manifestation of the term "world religion," albeit in German, was in this sense of the "uniquely universal" religion of Christ—in other words, the religion of the world—as distinct from all other homegrown, indigenous religions particular to the land: Landesreligionen, or "national religions," as the latter term was commonly translated. This Christian-monopolistic use of the term "world religion" persisted concurrently with the development of the scientific/taxonomic sense, as we see, for example, in the title Christianity the World-Religion (1897), a book by John Henry Barrows, the president of the World's Parliament of Religions and the Haskell Lecturer on Comparative Religion at the University of Chicago.

It might be surmised, therefore, that something like a watershed for the more objective-scientific, classificatory use of the term "world religions" was reached just when the term came to appear in the plural, that is, when more than one religion was recognized as belonging to this category. This turning point, which occurred in the 1880s, is the subject of chapter 3, which also marks the entry into part 2, the principal locus of the book. As we shall see, the first non-Christian religion to be included in the category "world religion" had only recently been recognized as a distinct tradition and identified with a single name—Buddhism, a neologism. Chapter 4 examines the European discovery of world religions. In fact, it may be credibly suggested that the popularity of world religions was more a legacy of the religious-evangelical enterprise of comparative theology than of the arcane technical and scholarly tradition of the nineteenth-century science of religion. If this should be the case, the present-day suppression of—or, at least, what appears to be a willful ignorance about—comparative theology may be an intriguing historical conundrum in its own right.

22 This, in accordance with historians' convention, refers to the years 1789–1914. But in the context of the present study, the dates are approximate and somewhat coincidental.
of Buddhism and how this suddenly visible "great religion" was conceptually constructed as a world religion from the beginning. It is almost as though, had it not been for Buddhism, science would not have had an immediate need for the term "world religion." Meanwhile, there was a controversy among those same first-generation scientists of religion as to whether Islam should be counted as a world religion. Given that Islam had long been known to Europeans as a de facto transregional religion and, moreover, as a formidable, imperious domain of non-Christianity and a constant threat to it, the eruption of this controversy at this time is highly peculiar. It is significant, in many event, that the first scholarly debate about world religions had as much to do with the problematic status of Islam, as with the possible relation—morphological or genealogical—of Buddhism, a newly discovered religion of Aryan origin, to EuroChristianity.

It is hardly a coincidence that Friedrich Max Müller, renowned Sanskritist and perhaps the most conspicuous philologist of the second half of the nineteenth century, has been regarded as preeminent among the founders of the science of religion. As it appeared, this new science owed its comparative logic to the science of language, also known as comparative philology, which had been flourishing ever since the European discovery of Sanskrit literature in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The transference of the scientific method from the field of language to that of religion was carried out explicitly for the first time by Müller, on the occasion of his historic lecture series delivered in 1870, appropriately entitled "Introduction to the Science of Religion." To the extent that this founding narrative is true, certain incipient components of the world religions discourse may be traced in the history of comparative philology. With this in mind, chapter 5 sketches the nineteenth-century development of philological scholarship, which yields the following observation:

Whatever fascination and promise the science of language might have held for the pioneering scholars of Oriental languages, one driving passion of comparative philology was in the exaltation of a particular grammatical apparatus: inflection. Metaphysically and abstractly imagined rather than historically documented, inflection was construed as a syntactical structure resulting naturally and directly from the innermost spiritual urge of a people (Volk), and as such it was said to attest to the creativity and the spirit of freedom intrinsic to the disposition of those who originated this linguistic form. Not surprisingly, these attributes, together with the grammatical form itself, were touted as the defining characteristics of the family of Indo-European (Aryan) languages, the family comprising Sanskrit as its "eldest daughter" in the East, Persian as her close kin, but also with the Western siblings Greek, Latin, Teutonic, Slavonic, and so forth, of which most modern European languages were unmistakable descendants. The ancient, broad band of the Indo-European language family, stretched across from east to west, had been intersected, in both space and time, by another linguistic family. This other group, the Semitic languages, included Arabic and Hebrew, which were well known to Europeans because they were the language of the Qur'an and of the Old Testament respectively. The great majority of nineteenth-century philologists maintained that, in comparison to the first family, this second tribe of languages was decidedly imperfect and inchoate in inflectional capability, and with this imperfection came all the limitations that characterized their native speakers as a race. Müller's contemporaries and longtime correspondent, Ernest Renan, is among the most celebrated exponents of this view.

Much of world history—as nineteenth-century scholars understood the matter—had been the work of interaction between these two "families" or "races," Aryan and Semitic. Extending beyond this huge crossroads of world historical powers lay an almost indefinite domain of a third estate, consisting of innumerable languages whose genealogical relation was less certain, except for some obvious local clustering here and there. Comparative philology suggested that these languages had syntactical structures even further removed from inflection than the Semitic tongues; in fact, their mode of signification was believed to have developed in reverse order to that of the Aryan languages. The syntax of these languages, it was speculated, had begun as the concatenation of root words and was formed through gradual coalescing of the roots and the attendant atrophy of what had been distinct, originally independent word roots. This process of agglutination was exactly the opposite of the development of "pure" inflection, in which each word ending grew naturally and spontaneously out of the word root, as it were, from within. According to this theory widely embraced by philologists of the nineteenth century, the inflectional structure of Semitic languages was fated to remain imperfect and constrained, and therefore impure, because the process of development was already compromised by incipient agglutination.

It is in light of this devaluation of the Semitic in relation to the Aryan (or Indo-European) that we may begin to understand the new logic and the renewed momentum behind the particularly harsh condemnation of Islam (chapter 6). With the emergence of the science of comparative philology, it is as though the age-old European anti-Semitism—or more precisely, negative sentiments against the Jews—took a new turn and found a novel deployment.
In short, this scientifically based anti-Semitism facilitated a new expression of Europe's age-old animosity toward the Islamic powers, insofar as this science categorized Jews and Arabs as being "of the same stock," conjointly epitomizing the character of the Semitic "race."

It is difficult to ascertain the full implications of this powerful notion, and to appreciate its utility for reconceptualizing the self-understanding of Christian Europe. Chief among the new challenges posed by this idea was its deployment in the semitization of Islam. Thenceforward, the zealously monotheistic, materially poor, mentally rigid, and socially illiberal desert Arab—already frequently described by nineteenth-century writers as "fanatic"—has come to stand as the quintessential Muslim, thus displacing the earlier image of the "Mohammedan" as an indolent Turk wallowing in opulent infidelity. At the same time, in obvious correlation to the vilifying and condescending image of Semitic Islam, there surged among European scholars a renewed interest in so-called Islamic mysticism. Sufism was particularly valorized as a higher form of Semitic Islam, there surged among European scholars a renewed interest in so-called Islamic mysticism. Sufism was particularly valorized as a higher form of Semitic Islam, therefore essentially Aryan in nature, hence exterior to what was deemed Islam proper.

Chapter 7 considers the position of F. Max Müller with respect to these philosophical innovations and the subsequent development of the science of religion and of the world religions discourse. As a reputed patriarch of modern comparative study of religion and advocate of the genealogical classification of religion modeled after the science of language, it might be expected that his role was above all to authorize the tripartite division of the human race and to advance the comprehensive mapping of the world religions. While these outcomes indeed appear to have followed in the wake of his scholarly endeavors and they are often personally attributed to him by posterity, a closer examination of Müller's work suggests that much of this result was, in an important sense, despite his own theoretical standpoint and against his wishes and opinions. As is evident especially from his early work—most significantly, "Last Results of the Turanian Researches," also known as "On the Turanian Language" (1853) and The Languages of the Seat of War in the East (1854; 2d ed., 1855)—two lengthy essays written with great energy and in haste, but little read ever since—his outlook on the origin and development of language and of language groups diverged markedly from those of comparative philologists up to his time, as well as of scholars who came thereafter. Not surprisingly, his idea of scientific classification of religions, too, was considerably at odds with the various taxonomies advanced by his peers, the latter being beholden to the logic of philological classification. The divergence of Müller's views from the main-stream was generally understood by his contemporaries as attributable to his religious (rather than scholarly) orientation. It was thought that his old-fashioned attachment to the biblical doctrine of the unitary origin of human-kind, or monogenesis, did not allow him to entertain fairly the possibility of multiple and separate origins of races; hence much of what was distinctive in his own theorizing was roundly dismissed as mere idiosyncrasy, something stemming from his prescientific sentiments, and thus of little scholarly import. Müller in turn protested against this dismissal precisely on philological scientific grounds, but apparently to no avail.

The analysis in chapter 7 thus provides occasion to reflect critically not only on the position of Müller in the legacy of the science of religion, of which he is reputedly a key founding figure, but also on the relation—and distance—between the logic of scientific comparativism and the doctrine of religious pluralism.

What transpired between the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the 1920s—that is, the efficient causes, so to speak, that finally brought about the new discourse of world religions—will not be comprehensively studied in this book. It does not seem likely, in fact, that this transition could be adequately described or credibly explained by examining academic trends and religious movements alone. Instead of attempting such a speculative global explanation, then, the last portion of the book, part 3, offers a series of open-ended, that is to say, inconclusive and rather more projective, observations. In effect, the individual sections comprising chapter 8 identify various events and domains that might warrant further investigation in the future: (1) the historical significance and influence of preeminent publication projects, most importantly, the Sacred Books of the East; (2) the preconditions and the aftermath of the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893; (3) the role played by various private individuals and foundations in promoting the new scholarship on religion, or what was more likely called "natural theology" in the nineteenth century and "history of religion(s)" in the twentieth. Section 4 acknowledges what this book, out of practical necessity, leaves out: the participation of the non-West in the production of the world religions categories. The final section (5) considers another possible strategy for tracing the transformation of the world religions discourse from the older, more restrictive notion (as universalistic religions) to the later, more inclusive one (as all of the major religions of the world). This metamorphic process may be illuminated by a broad survey and comprehensive analysis of world religions texts published in the early decades of the twentieth century—a task beyond the scope of this book.
Here, an example or two must suffice. An expressly pedagogic volume called *Religions of the World*, edited by Carl Clemen, for example, clearly distinguishes between the categories of "world religions" and "national religions"; yet, in addition to Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam, the category of world religions now includes a religion hitherto considered a quintessential national religion, namely, Judaism—though with another name, "religion of the Hebrews." Although Clemen's is but one example and not necessarily typical, the inclusion of Judaism in the league of world religions at this point may prove significant also in that it roughly coincided with the inception of a new concept of the West defined as Judeo-Christian. This hyphenated identity of the West—which gained momentum almost exclusively in the United States in the 1930s—appears to have eclipsed the significance of the older idea of Europe defined as Christendom.

Chapter 8 concludes with a brief reflection on the significance of Max Weber in this moment of transition. In his massive unfinished work *Economic Ethic of the World Religions (Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen)—of which the disproportionately famous Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism was a harbinger—Weber effectively undermined the erstwhile distinction between world religions and national religions, much debated by the nineteenth-century scientists of religion. Weber accomplished this not by means of any theoretical deliberations but seemingly by default: he had no use for the term "national religions." More specifically, Weber was interested in the subject of so-called world religions—which now included not only Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam but also Hinduism, Confucianism, and with some qualifications, ancient Judaism—because, in his opinion, each of these religions without exception was determined by particular characteristics of the society in which it had been a long-standing tradition. From his adamantly secularist sociological standpoint, it was axiomatic that all religions were particular, no matter how universalistic their cosmologies and their evangelical aspirations. For Weber, in effect, all of what he called "world religions" were what the nineteenth-century scholars called "national religions."

It still remains to be inquired in earnest, however, whether the transformation of the concept of world religions from the highly selective, discriminatory sense of the nineteenth century to the seemingly more inclusive sense of the twentieth can be considered a triumph of the pluralist ethos, whether the expansion of the list is something to be celebrated as democratization of the science of religion and decentralization of Eurohegemonic perspective more generally, or for that matter, whether the intent and import of Weber's unfinished project had anything whatsoever to do with such a "pluralist" agenda. The discourse of world religions, in any event, finally came of age when the potent and dangerous challenges and opportunities for world-hegemonic power and glory presented themselves, for the first time, to the naked eye of the European. Chapter 9 casts a glance in the direction of this question by considering one of the leading theologians of the time, Ernst Troeltsch. We will attend to the conceptual and rhetorical maneuvers observable in the last lecture he wrote, but never delivered, owing to his untimely death in 1923. The lecture, tellingly entitled "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions," was a plea for a united front of the coalition of all religions—or what he termed "religion as such"—against the surging tide of secularism. At the same time, his clarion call amounted to a fresh declaration of the universal relevance of Christianity, which Troeltsch called unambiguously and without irony the religion of Europe. This last chapter, then, entertains the possibility that the discourse of world religions, whose rhizomatic growth in the nineteenth century I trace, when it finally erupted in the early twentieth century, facilitated the conversion of the Eurohegemonic claim from one context to another—that is, from the older discourse of Christian supremacy (now considered bankrupt by many liberal Christians) to the new discourse of world religions, couched in the language of pluralism and diversity.

4. Writing History in the Age of Theory: A Brief Discourse on Method

Everything Kraus wrote is like that: a silence turned inside out, a silence that catches the storm of events in its black folds, billows, its livid lining turned outward.

WALTER BENJAMIN, "Karl Kraus"

It may be said that the academy as an institution in modern times has been a relatively sequestered place, self-consciously detached from the surrounding world, thus somewhat more amenable to the centripetal forces of close analysis. The alleged isolationism of the academy, of course, is not to be taken at face value. Yet, habitual proclamations of autonomy and relentless pursuits of self-fashioning are characteristic of this institution, and these habits often cause academicians to leave a considerable trail of paper in their wake.

Despite the abundance of self-commentary, it nonetheless remains very difficult to ascertain why or how some changes in ideas or changes in scholarly conventions occur. To be sure, such events as scholarly debates and controversies can be fertile ground for historical excavation. But it is essential that we begin by recognizing, with utmost seriousness, that these events are, first
and foremost, rhetorical events. Be they disputes, supplications, intellectual courtships, or apologia, these dealings are carried out over language and by means of language, in a fairly ordinary sense of that term. To overlook this utterly obvious fact, and to trivialize such a discursive event by declaring that it is merely about language, is at once to short-circuit any possible path for a critique of ideology and to be duped by the crypto-idealist ruse of the academy’s own self-fashioning. What matters is the practice of language that is never, in the long run, merely about language.

To put this more graphically, when a headstrong intellectual actively attempts to inflect someone else’s prose or to outwit the rhetorical force of a predecessor’s (or an adversary’s) statement by giving it further momentum or a novel spin, the attempt often ends up dragging out, pulling up, and thereby revealing certain forces and discursive tectonics that are not reducible to anything so local and insular-sounding as the “personal motives” of the interlocutors concerned. Such general geotectonic factors are, in a word, historical. They remain viable for the most part invisibly, but on occasion they flare up. Particularly in moments of conceptual difficulty or ideational “fix,” these factors often burst into visibility, and this happens not only in dialogues and debates among several interlocutors, but also in the contemplative monologue of a single individual, where the solitary author may be trying to write herself out of a certain prescribed problem, trying to outmaneuver the logical constraints and rhetorical compulsion of that script, in order to reshuffle the hand she has been dealt by the historical moment. It is these gestures and maneuvers—conformist, reactionary, or revolutionary—that we shall attend to and seek to understand.

But what does a turn of phrase reveal? How could something so minute and seemingly so incidental as a gesture of language indicate anything beyond what has its provenance in the author’s person and his immediate circumstance, that is, anything over and above his conscious intentions, unconscious motives, habits, dispositions, social milieu, and the like? Above all, could forms of language employed by this or that author, rhetorical moves made at this or that moment, disclose to us anything of significance about history, and if so, how? Or, perhaps more to the point, could an analysis of such forms and moves be enlisted and incorporated for the purpose of producing historical knowledge, or even historical narrative?

These questions are difficult to answer. Even though I know the answers to be generally in the affirmative, the reasoning that could be articulated to support them might seem too intricate to be fully credible; it could appear either suspiciously obscure or improbably clever, and in the end, devious and in-scrutable. This impression may be unavoidable, particularly in the eyes of some historians schooled in another method, who may see their own professional practice precisely as a powerful antidote against pseudohistorical pronouncements, including those proffered by the overly literary, language-obsessed, rhetorical analysts who are predisposed to the kind of intellectual activities described as “close reading,” the kind of neoformalist interpretation carried out, so it is charged, hermetically sealed off from everything outside “the text.” All too often, it is said, such an empirically undisciplined approach ends up taking the anecdotal for the historical.

I acknowledge the legitimacy of these concerns, though not of a blanket dismissal of the rhetorical analytic strategy itself. At the same time, I am moved to point out—that what often underlies the historical-realist suspicion is a particular assumption about the nature of language, or what is often referred to as the representational theory of language, an assumption not generally shared by the contemporary partisans of rhetorical analysis. According to the least subtle version of this theory, language at its best reflects what it is not, that is, reality; language mirrors reality, ideally, with minimum refraction. This theory presupposes a particular ontology and thereby precludes other ways of construing and configuring the relation between language and reality, or between language and history. It would not be clear what Walter Benjamin describes in the passage quoted above, a negative revelation of language, the possibility of the seamy underside of a quiescent language billowing out in the ferocious passing of a “storm of events” that are too real, too wild, too volatile for representation.

Given divergences in professional orientation, it seems doubtful that there should be definitive answers that would satisfy all readers once and for all. For one thing, it must be conceded that the degree of clarity and transparency attainable while various parties are separately encamped is not great. It seems unlikely, moreover, that an abstract methodological exposition alone would cause people to reconsider their own position or to switch camps merely out of, say, curiosity or sympathy. Under the circumstances, then, since what can be persuasively said theoretically about the method is limited, I will instead briefly describe, in a prosaic and practical manner, the procedures that I have actually followed in producing this work.
Above all, I have sought to compose a work of critical history fundamentally driven and animated by the logic and the rhetorical forces of the primary sources. The general argument of the book is constructed as a series of readings performed upon the body of some prominent, exemplary, exceptional, or otherwise significant texts, in particular, those written in the vernacular for lay audiences, published between the early seventeenth and the early twentieth century, whose subject matter can be broadly described as “religions of the world.” Although the texts and passages privileged for close scrutiny are necessarily selective, I have intended that this reading project as a whole be supported by a comprehensive survey of the genre, amounting to roughly two- to three-hundred titles in all, depending on how narrowly or broadly one defines the genre. In practical terms, my strategic aspirations entailed, on the one hand, speed-reading a large quantity of fairly old, voluminous texts (often under conditions of limited access because of their rarity and antiquity) and on the other hand, detailed, slow reading of selected texts with heightened rhetorical sensitivity. Expending more time and effort on the primary sources in this fashion, rather than following the lead of existing scholarship that might be partially or tangentially related to my own concern, was a choice I made early in the project.

Needless to say, speed-reading and rhetorical analysis both require a relatively high degree of linguistic competence, the ability I may claim to possess adequately in English, my second language, but decidedly less in German, French, or Italian, and none or close to none in some other European languages that would or might have been of relevance (Dutch, to be sure, and possibly Spanish, Danish, and Swedish, for example). This, admittedly, contributed to the focus on the texts written in or translated into English analyzed here; but there is also another, more structural reason for the predominance of the Anglophone literature. For, as already adumbrated in the previous section and as will be demonstrated extensively in what follows, the actual manifestation of the world religions discourse in the form familiar to us today was very much an American phenomenon; twentieth-century America was a final destination of the migration of a European concept (Weltreligion or Weltgodsdienst). This concept was first transposed upon the nineteenth-century (mostly British) schemata for classifying and mapping “other religions,” and eventually it became instrumental in the ascendancy of the discourse of religious pluralism and diversity, the discourse that has since been viewed as a signature attribute of a specifically American ethos. In this course of transmigration and mutation, moreover, certain ideological underpinnings of the older hierarchical discourse did not so much diminish and disappear as become unrecognizable under the new outlook of the pluralist ideology—or supposed democracy—of world religions.

Such, then, are the procedures, constraints, parameters, and the emergent scenario of the present work. This brief statement may not amount to a theoretical justification of a methodology, but for reasons I have rehearsed above, it seems injudicious for an author to attempt to convert the readers before the first chapter begins. Instead, I merely wish to earn from my readers as much benefit of the doubt as is reasonable. Hence my best hope for this introduction, as I see it, is to impart a certain illumination in advance, and—to shift the metaphor slightly—to help conjure an atmosphere for felicitous reading.

23. This may explain, if not excuse, the relative paucity of reference to secondary literature. This is not to say that I have not learned much from the existing scholarship on related areas and topics. These topics include the history of the study of religion as a modern scientific discipline and, to some extent, recent debates on the so-called Western construction of religion as a concept or as a category. Some of the relevant literature has been mentioned in note 9 above. But I did not choose to commence the argument by entering into direct conversation with any of the existing critical literature.

24. I should add, however, that in recent years, there is evidence that this notion of world religion has been successfully exported to various other linguistic and cultural domains.