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TABLE OF CONTENTS

10. The Conquest of the Past. Christian Attitudes towards Civic History. <i>Aude Busine</i>	220
11. Historising Religion between Spiritual Continuity and Friendly Takeover. Salvation History and Religious Competition during the First Millenium AD. <i>David Engels</i>	237
12. Oriental Religions and the Conversion of the Roman Empire. The Views of Ernest Renan and of Franz Cumont on the Transition from Traditional Paganism to Christianity. <i>Danny Praet</i>	285 - 307

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David ENGELS and Peter VAN NUFFELEN

Religion and Competition in Antiquity



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.	
<i>David Engels / Peter Van Nuffelen</i>	7
1. Religion and Competition in Antiquity. An Introduction.	
<i>David Engels / Peter Van Nuffelen</i>	9
2. Religious Rivalry in Seleucid Babylonia. Marduk of Babylon versus Anu of Uruk.	
<i>Tom Boiy</i>	45
3. Oracles and Oracle-Sellers. An Ancient Market in Futures.	
<i>Esther Eidinow</i>	55
4. Liberty versus Religious Tradition. Some ‘Impious’ Thinkers in Ancient Greece.	
<i>Aikaterini Lefka</i>	96
5. <i>Etrusca disciplina</i> and Roman Religion. From Initial Hesitation to a Privileged Place.	
<i>Dominique Briquel</i>	112
6. Cohabitation or Competition in Ostia under the Empire?	
<i>Françoise Van Haepelen</i>	133
7. The End of Open Competition? Religious Disputations in Late Antiquity.	
<i>Peter Van Nuffelen</i>	149
8. Competing Coenobites. Food and Drink in the Lives of Theodoretus of Cyrrhus.	
<i>Veit Rosenberger</i>	173
9. A Time for Prayer and a Time for Pleasure. Christianity’s Struggle with the Secular World.	
<i>Ine Jacobs</i>	192

TABLE OF CONTENTS

10.	The Conquest of the Past. Christian Attitudes towards Civic History. <i>Aude Busine</i>	220
11.	Historising Religion between Spiritual Continuity and Friendly Takeover. Salvation History and Religious Competition during the First Millenium AD. <i>David Engels</i>	237
12.	Oriental Religions and the Conversion of the Roman Empire. The Views of Ernest Renan and of Franz Cumont on the Transition from Traditional Paganism to Christianity. <i>Danny Praet</i>	285

12. Oriental Religions and the Conversion of the Roman Empire. The Views of Ernest Renan and of Franz Cumont on the Transition from Traditional Paganism to Christianity

Danny Praet

1. Introduction

The Belgian historian of religions Franz Cumont (1868-1947) was a specialist of what he called ‘the oriental religions’: cults that spread, in the late Republican and in the Imperial period, from the Eastern provinces to Rome and the Western world. The massive two volumes of *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra* (published between 1894 and 1899) had made the young scholar the leading specialist of the cult of the Persian god Mithras in the Graeco-Roman world: a mystery cult which, according to Cumont, used Asia Minor as its bridgehead for further expansion to the West. But Cumont became an expert of all the so-called oriental religions: in the eponymous book published in 1906 he treated the international success, not only of the mysteries of Mithras, but also of the indigenous cults of Asia-Minor such as Attis and Cybele, of Egypt (Isis and Osiris-Serapis) and of Syria (the Dea Syria, Adonis, the numerous Ba’als).¹ The full title of the latter book, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, clearly implied that Cumont did not want to include two other religious traditions spreading from the East to the West in about the same

¹ See the critical introduction by Bonnet & Van Haepere to the new edition of this classic in the Bibliotheca Cumontiana Series: CUMONT (2006) and BONNET / PIRENNE-DELFORGE / PRAET (2009) for critical essays on the concept of ‘oriental religions’ after 100 years of scholarship. It is the intent of this contribution to analyse the way Cumont (influenced by Renan and others) thought of the competition between Mithraism and the Oriental Religions and Christianity, not to contrast it with the present-day state of the art. Most of the positions held by Cumont have been abandoned: see the two surveys of more recent Mithraic scholarship by Roger BECK (1984) and (2004), MASTROCINQUE (2009), 9-23 and the introduction by Nicole Belayche and Attilio Mastrocinque to the new edition of *Les mystères de Mithra* in the Bibliotheca Cumontiana: CUMONT (2012).

period: Judaism and Christianity. Although he had a more than average knowledge of ancient Jewish and of early Christian history, and although he published several articles in both areas,² Cumont claimed, both in his major publications and in private letters, that his competence did not go beyond the pagan traditions.³ As he wrote in the introduction to *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*:

We are more likely to be reproached for an apparently serious omission. We have investigated only the internal development of paganism in the Latin world, and have considered its relation to Christianity only incidentally and by the way (*qu'incidemment et accessoirement*). The question is nevertheless important and has been the subject of celebrated lectures as well as of learned monographs and widely distributed manuals. We wish to slight neither the interest nor the importance of that controversy, and it is not because it seemed negligible that we have not entered into it.⁴

Cumont added a number of bibliographical references, especially books which treated the relationship between the pagan mystery-cults of the ancient Near East and Christianity.⁵ He kept adding new titles on the subject to this footnote in the next editions, and he added an appendix on the Bacchic mysteries in the fourth edition, but he never published a chapter with his views on the relation

² These will be collected and edited as volume V of the Scripta Minora Series in the Bibliotheca Cumontiana, edited by Danny Praet, Annelies Lannoy and Kristoffel Demoen, scheduled for 2014.

³ See Annelies LANNON (2011) and (2012).

⁴ We will always refer first to the new edition in the Bibliotheca Cumontiana, in this case by Corinne Bonnet and Françoise Van Haepere and, if an English translation exists, to that page-number: CUMONT (2006), 6-7 and (1956), xvi.

⁵ In the first edition (p. ix, note 1), he referred to Otto GRUPPE, *Griechische Mythologie*, 1906, 1606 ff. (full title: *Griechische Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte*. München: Beck, 1906) as the (then) most recent state of the art, noting that Gruppe was less negative about pagan influence on early Christianity than Adolf VON HARNACK, *Ausbreitung des Christentums*, t. II, 274 ff. (full title: *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten. 1. Die Mission in Wort und Tat 2. Die Verbreitung*. Leipzig 1902. And Cumont also quoted Cheyne, *Bible Problems*, p. 190 (full title: Thomas Kelly Cheyne, *Bible Problems and the New Material for their Solution; a Plea for Thoroughness of Investigation, Addressed to Churchmen and Scholars*, London / New York, 1904), without explicitly endorsing this view, however close to his own analysis of the importance of Babylonia and Persia: 'The Christian religion is a synthesis, and only those who have dim eyes can assert that the intellectual empires of Babylonia and Persia have fallen.' See now the doctoral thesis of Annelies LANNON, *Het christelijke mysterie. De relatie tussen het vroege christendom en de heidense mysterieculten in het denken van Franz Cumont en van Alfred Loisy, in de context van het modernisme*. Universiteit Gent, 2012, especially chapters three on a number of contemporaries (pp. 145- 235; e.g. 191-196 for Gruppe), and chapter five 365-479 on Cumont.

between the oriental religions and the two sole surviving religions of the ancient Roman world: Judaism and Christianity. Cumont's very concept of 'religion' was Judaeo-Christian, as Corinne Bonnet has observed: 'Héritier presque inconscient d'une vision judéo-chrétienne de la religion, Cumont sacralise la vie intérieure, la croyance, la conscience, la spiritualité, et rejette le rite du côté du profane.'⁶ As a consequence, our analysis will have to concentrate first on what Cumont wrote about the competition between different pagan traditions, and, secondly, with regard to the competition between pagan cults and Christianity, on his incidental remarks and on what is implicit in his history of religious change in the Roman Empire.

2. Ernest Renan on the Oriental Religions and Christianity

It is important to note that Cumont's work on Mithras and on the Oriental Religions in general was interpreted by many of his contemporaries as directly relevant to the origins and the success of Christianity. When Cumont chose to become a specialist of Mithras, in the context of the late nineteenth century, this choice was not without ideological implications, since Ernest Renan (1823-1892) had famously identified the cult of Mithras as Christianity's most important rival in the struggle for religious dominance in the Roman Empire. In his *Marc Aurèle ou la fin du monde antique* (1881), the seventh and final volume of his *Histoire des origines du christianisme*, Renan had devoted chapter 31 to the causes of the Christian victory.⁷ His analysis started with the general need of a moral reform in the late second and third centuries. Philosophical systems, such as the one upheld by the Stoic emperor who was regarded by Renan (and others such as Edward Gibbon) as pivotal in the history of the later Roman Empire, could not satisfy this need felt by intellectuals and the general public alike. 'C'est par la nouvelle discipline de la vie qu'il introduisait dans le monde que le christianisme a vaincu. Le monde avait besoin d'une réforme morale; la philosophie ne la donnait pas.' Religion was less intellectually elitist, but not every religion could satisfy this need of a moral

⁶ BONNET (2007), 4 quoted, and the whole article for the intellectual background of Cumont.

⁷ RENAN (1881), chapter 31; 'Raisons de la victoire du christianisme', 561-588. Cumont had a personal copy of this book. He donated most of his personal library to the Academia Belgica, and this rich collection still holds the seven volumes of Renan's *Histoire des origines du christianisme*. He owned the *Marc-Aurèle* in the fourth edition of 1882 (VI, 648 as published by Calmann-Lévy in Paris; AB library number C.01.07.130). Cumont's private library also held numerous other works by and on Renan, the catalogue of the Academia Belgica can be consulted at <http://www.academiabelgica.it>.

reform. The moral earnestness of Judaism which, according to Renan, was not oriented at the after-life but at happiness in this life, could have satisfied those needs, but it could not conquer the hearts of an Empire that had fought Jewish rebels for the last two centuries. Renan saw the Roman Empire itself as an experiment, all be it a failed one. The glory Rome had aspired to was to establish a religious, social and political system which Renan presented (*mutatis mutandis*) or we can read as the ancient version of the modern French ideal of the secular state ('*état laïque*').⁸ since the Roman gods required no adherence to dogma's, since most of the people were somewhat skeptical about the ancient myths and some even about the very existence of the gods, Rome could be presented by Renan as a stage in the religious-political history of mankind in which the elite tried to base the sense of belonging of the people, not upon a religious identity, but upon philosophical humanism and secular Roman Law. The failure of this experiment left the Roman world with a need of moral reform and the need of a new sense of belonging. For Renan, the Oriental Religions and, eventually, Christianity would fill this need. He saw the success of Christianity in fact as the victory of (a form of) Judaism over its conqueror. 'La religion que Rome répandra dans le monde sera justement celle qu'elle a le plus vivement combattue, le judaïsme sous forme chrétienne.' Renan concluded his analysis by the observation that, from the Renaissance onwards, the Western World would gradually free itself from theocratic systems and return to the secular model of the Roman Republic, with the French Republic as its completion.

Ernest Renan, who was both an anticlerical rationalist and a *prêtre manqué*, considered early Christianity, in that stage of history, to have been superior to and even more rational than ancient paganism. Renan was influenced by Hegel,⁹ and the views of Cumont will be even more explicitly evolutionist, but comparable to Renan's in this respect. Christianity preached a moral religion and provided a basis for society. Renan argued that its criticism of idolatry and

⁸ RENAN (1881), 587: 'La gloire de Rome, c'est d'avoir essayé de résoudre le problème de la société humaine sans théocratie, sans dogme surnaturel. Le judaïsme, le christianisme, l'islamisme, le bouddhisme sont, au contraire, de grandes institutions embrassant la vie humaine tout entière sous forme de religions révélées.' And the conclusion of the chapter (pp. 587-8): 'Le Moyen Âge, règne du christianisme, de l'islamisme et du bouddhisme, est bien l'ère de la théocratie. Le coup de génie de la Renaissance a été de revenir au droit romain, qui est essentiellement le droit laïque, de revenir à la philosophie, à la science, à l'art vrai, à la raison, en dehors de toute révélation.' We would also remind the reader of the historical context of the work of Renan and of the lectures on the Oriental Religions by Cumont: the Law of 09/12/1905 on the separation between Church and State in France had an intellectual and a political history of decades.

⁹ SIMON (2006), 428; PRAET (2011) and (2012).

of bloody sacrifice actually saved the Ancient World from a rise of the irrational:

Tout le monde admettait les miracles les plus absurdes; la mythologie courante, ayant perdu son sens primitif, atteignait les dernières limites de l'ineptie. La somme de sacrifices que le christianisme demandait à la raison était moindre que celle que supposait le paganisme. Se convertir au christianisme n'était donc pas un acte de crédulité; c'était presque un acte de bon sens relatif. Même au point de vue du rationaliste, le christianisme pouvait être envisagé comme un progrès.¹⁰

It is in light of this analysis that one should read Renan's famous phrase about Mithraism as Christianity's main opponent. 'On peut dire que, si le christianisme eût été arrêté dans sa croissance par quelque maladie mortelle, le monde eût été mithriaste.'¹¹

This analysis has been quoted, endorsed or criticized by many.¹² Robert Turcan who intended his *Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain* to be the successor-volume of Cumont's *Religions Orientales dans le paganisme romain*,¹³ explicitly commented on Renan in an earlier overview of the same topic. He rejected Renan's claim on the obvious ground that the Mithras cult excluded women and responded with the counterclaim that, more likely, the world would have converted to the cult of Isis.¹⁴ Most modern scholars (including Turcan) have changed paradigms and would no longer analyse the religious transformation of the Roman World as a rivalry between this or other individual pagan cult and Christianity. Despite the direct rhetoric of the Mithras-

¹⁰ RENAN (1881), 582-3.

¹¹ RENAN (1881), 597. Compare (1881), 575-6: 'Un dieu oriental surtout balançait un moment la fortune du christianisme, et faillit devenir l'objet d'un de ces cultes à propagande universelle qui s'emparent de parties entières de l'humanité. Mithra est, dans la mythologie aryenne primitive, un des noms du soleil.'

¹² See PRAET (1993), 7, notes 8 and 9 for further references to Frazer, Harnack, e.a.

¹³ As Aline ROUSSELLE (1992), 446 claimed in her review of the first edition of the book. Her claim that Turcan even copied the sequence of the chapters and the internal structure of the chapters from Cumont is only partially correct: the first four chapters follow the Cumontian geographical sequence (Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria and Persia, with more poetical titles) but Turcan inserted a fifth chapter on 'cavaliers, mères et serpents', and expanded Cumont's chapter on astrology and magic to 'Occultisme et théosophie'. But it is significant that Turcan discusses 'Dionysos et Sabazios' as the final chapter, parallel to the Appendix on the Bacchic Mysteries in the fourth edition of *Les Religions Orientales*. We will return to the possible significance of the sequence chosen by Cumont *infra*.

¹⁴ TURCAN (1972), 77: 'Cette religion très pure et tonique rivalisa un temps avec la foi chrétienne. (... discussion of certain analogies, my remark) Mais en écartant les femmes, ils excluaient la moitié du genre humain. Aussi peut-on douter que le monde ait couru le hasard de se mithraïser. Nous croyons plutôt qu'il serait devenu isiaque.' This claim is not repeated however in his (1989) or (2004); see PRAET (1993), 7 for further references.

quote, Renan (and Cumont) did in fact not think about a competition between the Church and individual pagan cults. Renan was largely responsible for creating the category of the so-called Oriental religions¹⁵ and we should note that Renan presented the whole category of these cults as the Late Antique alternative to Christianity. Syncretism explains how Renan could both claim that the world (including the female half of the population) would have converted to Mithras and write that the entire category of these new religions were fierce competitors. Immediately following the often quoted phrase, Renan added that Mithras, through his many identifications with other Eastern deities, appealed both to soldiers and to women. So the rhetoric about the duel between Christianity and Mithras is in fact to a large extent synecdochical:

Mithra se prêtait à toutes les confusions, avec Attis, avec Adonis, avec Sabazius, avec Mên, qui étaient déjà en possession depuis longtemps de faire couler les larmes des femmes. Les soldats aussi affectionnaient ce culte. En rentrant dans leurs foyers, ils le portaient aux provinces frontières, sur le Rhin, sur le Danube. Aussi le mithriacisme résista-t-il plus que les autres cultes au christianisme.¹⁶

3. Cumont and Renan

Corinne Bonnet and Françoise Van Haepere have noted that Cumont was critical of the work of Renan, and of his sometimes adventurous claims,¹⁷ but that he also paid homage to Renan's legacy. He quoted him in the very beginning of the main text of *Les Religions Orientales* and also ended his discussion of the last oriental religion, Mithras, with the Renan counterfactual hypothesis.¹⁸ His critical commentary is well worth quoting, because it gives us an excellent introduction into the line of thought of Cumont. Although the Belgian scholar carefully documented his claims with references to all sorts of primary sources and the most up-to-date scholarly research, he too studied the history of the Oriental Religions 'sub specie historiae universalis' and he too was concerned with studying an evolution towards individual liberty and a scientific worldview free from religious interference:

¹⁵ See TURCAN (2004) and BONNET / VAN HAEPEREN (2006), xxiv-xxv.

¹⁶ RENAN (1881), 597.

¹⁷ CABANEL (1999), 612 refers to the hypotheses of Renan as 'approximations brillantes'. See also NAHUM-SIMON (1999) and HILAIRE (1999), *passim*.

¹⁸ CUMONT: 'Even Renan does not seem to have been sufficiently free from an old prejudice when he wrote on this subject [i.e. the Orient].' With a reference to *L'Antéchrist*, volume 4 of *Les origines du christianisme*, about the persecution under Nero and the Jewish rebellion. See BONNET / VAN HAEPEREN, Introduction xxiv-xxv on Renan and Cumont, with further bibliographical references.

Another witness to the vitality of Mithraic Mazdaism is the fact that it escaped becoming a kind of state religion of the Roman empire during the third century. An oft-quoted sentence of Renan's says: 'If Christianity had been checked in its growth by some deadly disease, the world would have become Mithraic.' In hazarding that statement he undoubtedly conjured up a picture of what would have been the condition of this poor world in that case. He must have imagined, one of his followers would have us believe,¹⁹ [Anatole France, my remark] that the morals of the human race would have been but little changed, a little more virile perhaps, a little less charitable, but only a shade different. The erudite theology taught by the mysteries would obviously have shown a laudable respect for science, but as its dogmas were based upon a false physics it would apparently have insured the persistence of an infinity of errors. Astronomy would not be lacking, but astrology would have been unassailable, while the heavens would still be revolving around the earth to accord with its doctrines. The greatest danger, it appears to me, would have been that the Cæsars would have established a theocratic absolutism supported by the Oriental ideas of the divinity of kings. The union of throne and altar would have been inseparable, and Europe would never have known the invigorating struggle between church and state. But on the other hand the discipline of Mithraism, so productive of individual energy, and the democratic organization of its societies in which senators and slaves rubbed elbows, contain a germ of liberty.²⁰

In this passage Cumont does not explicitly reject the possibility of Mithras winning the day, although the wording ('In hazarding that statement... / Quand il hasardait cette boutade...') suggests Cumont found it somewhat bold. But many would have been surprised that the Mithras-specialist would have regretted such a victory. In the next chapters of *Les Religions Orientales*, he will discuss the synthesis of philosophy, astral religion and the oriental religions, as the final phase of paganism. It is this ultimate synthesis and not any one given cult which, according to Cumont, both competed with Christianity and paved the way for its triumph. But we should note that Cumont and Renan clearly saw Christianity as a phase in the history of the relations between politics, science and religion, which in turn would be overcome in more recent times. Cumont's counterfactual fear that, had Mithraism (and its 'allies') won, the West would have succumbed to an Eastern-type theocracy and a union between religion and pseudo-science, implies not that Christianity itself was the highest ideal and final stage, but that the dialectics of Church and State, and of theology and

¹⁹ In note 73 Cumont refers to Anatole France, *Le mannequin d'osier* [which is volume two of his *L'Histoire contemporaine*], p. 318 in which the writer compared the morals of the emperor Julian with those of Christianity, claiming each epoch has only one moral system; and also to Salomon REINACH, *La morale du mithraïsme* (full reference: *Cultes, mythes et religions*, Tome II, Paris, 1906, 220-233, who also quoted A. France), CUMONT (2006), 232 = (1956), 160-1.

²⁰ CUMONT (2006), 250-251 = CUMONT (1956), 160. It is typical of Cumont's indirect style of communication that he does not discuss the claim itself.

science in the West, would eventually lead to a higher level of personal and scientific freedom than even the 'germ of liberty' present in the Mithraic circles.

In *Les Mystères de Mithra* Cumont had quoted another work by Renan, a passage from his *Dialogues et fragments philosophiques*²¹ in which the French thinker had called sun worship the most rational religion before the advent of Christianity. Cumont first explained how ancient philosophy had interpreted ancient religion as the symbolic expression of the way science then understood the world:

When critical thought sought to explain the sacred traditions and discovered in the popular gods the forces and elements of nature, it was obliged perforce to accord a predominant place to the star on which the very existence of our globe depended. 'Before religion reached the point where it proclaimed that God should be sought in the Absolute and the Ideal, that is to say, outside the world, one cult only was reasonable and scientific and that was the cult of the Sun.' [quote from Renan] From the time of Plato and Aristotle, Greek philosophy regarded the celestial bodies as animate and divine creatures; Stoicism furnished new arguments in favor of this opinion; while Neo-Pythagorism and Neo-Platonism insisted still more emphatically on the sacred character of the luminary which is the ever-present image of the intelligible God. These beliefs, approved by the thinkers, were widely diffused by literature, and particularly by the works in which romantic fiction served to envelop genuinely theological teachings.

4. Evolutionism and the end of traditional Roman religion

Cumont had an evolutionist view on the history of religions in which ancient religions had evolved from ritual to moral, from collective to individual, and from local, over national, to universal. Traditional Roman religion was simply outdated, and the Oriental Religions (which Cumont all considered to have been mystery religions) were the necessary transitional stage towards Christianity as the truly universal religion focusing on the moral fate of each and every individual. The picture Cumont painted of traditional Roman religion has become famous (although it has become outdated itself), but it was the starting point of his views on religious competition in Late Antiquity:

Perhaps there never was a religion so cold and prosaic as the Roman. Being subordinated to politics, it sought, above all, to secure the protection of the gods for the state and to avert the effects of their malevolence by the strict execution of appropriate practices. It entered into a contract with the celestial powers from which mutual obligations arose: sacrifices on one side, favors on the other. The

²¹ Dedicated to the French atheist, chemist, politician and Académicien Marcellin BERTHELOT (1827-1907), *Lettre à Berthelot*, The quote is taken from p. 168 of Renans work, CUMONT (2012) = (1956a), 184.

pontiffs, who were also magistrates, regulated the religious practices with the exact precision of jurists; as far as we know the prayers were all couched in formulas as dry and verbose as notarial instruments. The liturgy reminds one of the ancient civil law on account of the minuteness of its prescriptions. This religion looked suspiciously at the abandonment of the soul to the ecstasies of devotion. It repressed, by force if necessary, the exuberant manifestations of too ardent faith and everything that was not in keeping with the grave dignity befitting the relations of a *civis Romanus* with a god. The Jews had the same scrupulous respect as the Romans for a religious code and formulas of the past, [Jean Réville:] 'but in spite of their dry and minute practices, the legalism of the Pharisees stirred the heart more strongly than did Roman formalism.'²²

This cold and legalistic religion conquered the world through military force. It thus established the evolution from a national to a universal religion, but did so only partially because the religious choice of the people was not entirely free. Cumont furthermore stresses that Roman Religion never managed to conquer the hearts of the Oriental people, because its religion was in fact inferior, less evolved than the Oriental Religions which would soon conquer the conqueror.²³ Roman religion was a rational religion, both in the sense that it adopted a legalistic rationality, and in the sense that it fought irrational emotions in its subjects. Although it was, according to Cumont, a repressive religion in its fight against irrational or antisocial religious movements, it already contained an element of freedom in its theology and anthropology (if we can use these words here): in its legalistic, contractual view of the relationship between men and gods. The Oriental Religions will constitute the antithesis of all this: they will conquer the West by converting people out of their own free choice, they will bring emotion into the religious experience, present gods who are closer to the human condition, but also aspects of irrationalism and fanatic dependence on these divinities. Cumont never summarized these contrasts as we did here. Since he chose not to include Christianity in his books, he also never expressed the probable third stage of this grand historical dialectic, but it is perhaps not too bold an extrapolation to conclude he saw the adoption of Christianity as the new Roman State Religion as the synthesis between traditional Roman paganism and the Oriental Religions.

²² CUMONT (2006), 46 = (1956b), 23-4. The quote towards the end of the passage is from Jean RÉVILLE, *La religion à Rome sous les Sévères*, Paris, 1886. See CUMONT (2006), xxvi for the relationship between Cumont and Réville. Quoted e.g. by SCHEID (2003), 6-7 as one of the 'perspectives that, for many years, determined the modern view of Roman religion'.

²³ CUMONT (2006), 26 and 40 = CUMONT (1956b), 10 and 22: 'Not only were the gods of Egypt and Asia never supplanted like those of Gaul or Spain, but they soon crossed the seas and gained worshipers in every Latin Province.' See the doctoral project by Eline Scheerlinck (UGent) on Franz Cumont and Orientalism for his views on the Orient versus the West.

But, although we believe Cumont followed a historical philosophy of religion loosely inspired by Hegel, he was uniquely able to combine this with detailed surveys of the source-material. The Belgian scholar quoted so many primary sources and secondary literature it almost obfuscated the grand narrative of his books. In *Les Religions Orientales* he first emphatically rejected Marxist and other theories he saw as reductionist:

If we yielded to the tendency of many excellent minds of to-day and regarded history as the resultant of economic and social forces, it would be easy to show their influence in that great religious movement. (...) These reflections, which could be developed at some length, surely show the way in which the Oriental religions spread. It is certain that the merchants acted as missionaries in the seaports and places of commerce, the soldiers on the frontiers and in the capital, the slaves in the city homes, in the rural districts and in public affairs. But while this acquaints us with the means and the agents of the diffusion of those religions, it tells us nothing of the reasons for their adoption by the Romans. We perceive the how, but not the why, of their sudden expansion.

He emphatically presented his research as a history of the moral development of mankind,²⁴ which means that religion inevitably enters the realm of philosophy, be it both elitist and popular philosophy, but the religion of the masses follows with a certain *décalage* the intellectual progress made by the intellectual (and thus social) elite. This development of mankind is subjected to certain laws and Cumont's perspective is idealistic²⁵ in the German philosophical sense of the word without ever explicitly referring to this tradition: the greatest minds of every age are both the individual exponents and the motors of a general evolution in the intellectual history of mankind. Cumont was also influenced by William Robertson Smith and Edward Burnett Tylor and his theory of 'survivals'. As Annelies Lannoy has shown for the grand narrative of *Lux Perpetua*, philosophers of every age in Antiquity have created something which later affected the masses, although Cumont documented all the previous stages of the development as sediments.²⁶ This is how we should understand the many

²⁴ CUMONT (2006), 6 = CUMONT (1956b), xv: 'La propagation des cultes orientaux est, avec le développement du néo-platonisme, le fait capital de l'histoire morale de l'empire païen. (...) the leading fact in the moral history of the pagan empire.'

²⁵ Cumont combined an impressive command of the sources with an eclectic mixture of philosophical and anthropological theories, so we can not follow Aline ROUSSELLE (1999), 502 in her portrayal of Cumont as an historian and a philologist who is almost anti-theory: 'ne se fiant qu' à la documentation'. See PRAET (2011) and (2012).

²⁶ LANNOY (2010)

references in his books to and the articles he published on certain survivals of pagan rituals and ideas in Christianity and in Islam.²⁷

Next Cumont gives three explicit, positive and general reasons why the Oriental Religions were superior to traditional Roman religion: 'those religions gave greater satisfaction first, to the senses and passions, secondly, to the intelligence, finally, and above all, to the conscience.'²⁸ Both the rituals and the myths of the Oriental Religions triggered a greater emotional response. These gods had feelings, such as the grief and despair of Isis searching for her brother and husband, to which people could relate. The exotic appearance of the priests, the oriental music, and the unusual rituals were all tonic. But there were also aspects of terror, as the initiation rituals of the mysteries used both fear and hope. Cumont also stressed the alliance between the oriental religions and the ancient sciences, especially astronomy and astrology. In his view, the rituals and myths had evolved into moral teachings, linking the moral behaviour of individuals and their fate after life to a theory of the astral origins of the soul and of its final destination.

5. Syncretism and collaboration between the Oriental Religions

Syria and Asia Minor were for Cumont the two regions where different traditions met and where the Oriental Religions were formed, before they started their conquest of the West. A good example of his approach is the chapter 'L'Asie Mineure' of *Les Religions Orientales*.²⁹ Cumont studied the spread of the *taurobolium*, the bull-sacrifice and so-called blood-baptism,³⁰ associated with the cult of Attis and Cybele, and concluded that Cybele had been identified in Asia Minor with the Iranian goddess Anahita, the consort of Mithras. He believed the moral religion of the Persians had given a higher spiritual content and meaning to the original primitivism of the *taurobolium* which was based upon the magical power of blood. Cumont added another element to his religious 'melting pot' with the Thracian and Phrygian god Sabazios, which was associated with the Orphic Dionysus Zagreus and, still according to Cumont,

²⁷ See the index of CUMONT (2006), s.v. 'église', 'islam' etc. or such studies as *La plus ancienne légende de saint Georges* in *RHR* 114, 1936, 5-51 or *St. George and Mithra 'The Cattle-Thief'* in *JRS* 27, 1937, 63-71.

²⁸ CUMONT (2006), 45 = CUMONT (1956b), 28.

²⁹ CUMONT (2006), 71-107 = CUMONT (1956b), 46-72. See also MOTTE (1999) on syncretism in Cumont.

³⁰ Compare RENAN (1881), 569 who wrote this about the importance of the *taurobolium*: 'Le taurobole est, entre tous les rites païens, celui dont les chrétiens redoutent le plus la concurrence; il fut en quelque sorte le dernier effort du paganisme expirant contre le mérite chaque jour plus triomphant du sang de Jésus.'

also identified with the homonymous Jahweh Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts. In this way a syncretic link was established with Judaism. In the system developed by Cumont the cult of Attis and Cybele was already in Hellenistic Asia Minor influenced by Jewish monotheism and by Mosaic morality, next to Persian dualism and morality. The Persian and the Jewish parts of the population of Asia Minor had already 'prepared' the further religious developments in the West, where Mithraism and Christianity³¹ would become rivals. This evolution and this synthesis between native Asia Minor, Greek, Jewish and Persian elements explains for Cumont how a distasteful 'baptism by blood', based upon the primitive idea of a magical transfer of physical strength, could produce the teaching of 'in aeternum renatus': the idea that the ritual secured a blissful afterlife. Since the ritual of the taurobolium as Cumont understood it, implied that the candidates literally and physically descended into the earth, into a pit, to receive the blood of the bull slaughtered above them, and since in Late Antiquity the after life was situated in the heavens and thought to be a blissful life for the soul, the cult of Attis and Cybele is an example of the historical development from Classical to Late Antiquity of mankind towards the spiritual, and the symbolic expression in an ancient cult of an ascension from the lowest (the earth, primitive blood magic) to the highest (the heavens, the immortal soul). When this evolved and combined cult of Attis-Sabazios and Cybele-Anahita spread to and in the West, Cumont will also claim that Cybele formed an external alliance with the mystery cult of Mithras, which was exclusively male.

6. Comparisons between Mithraism and Christianity

Both for Renan and for Cumont Christianity was, after the Oriental Religions, the next, necessary step in the evolution of ancient religious consciousness, but they also compared the Christian faith to ancient cults and especially to Mithraism. For many contemporaries these comparisons overshadowed the fact that both Renan and Cumont concluded Christianity was superior. The comparative approach itself, the suggestion that there were indeed parallels, were interpreted as attacks against the unique and divine position of 'the one true faith'. More specifically, it was read as a non explicit attack against the idea that the so-called 'triumph of Christianity' had been unique in history and-or inexplicable by ordinary historical factors. The early career of Cumont

³¹ It is almost irritating that Cumont never published his schematics for the emergence of Christianity, but we can guess the 'melting pot' Asia-Minor of Saint Paul would be its real cradle for Cumont.

coincided with the Modernist crisis during which the Catholic Church tried to ban the application of modern scientific methods to the study of the Bible and of Church History.³² A comparative approach in which Christianity was treated as just one among many religious traditions, was not appreciated by the Catholic establishment. Cumont only occasionally referred to Christianity explicitly, as we have seen, but his presentation of religions which spread from the same area and during the same period to the West, which had many structural features in common with Christianity and managed, during the first centuries of the common era, to make a comparable number of converts, was interpreted as relevant to the history of the early Church by both the Catholic Church and by freethinkers.

The dossier of the so-called ‘affaire Cumont’ (1910-1911) about the refusal of the Catholic Minister of Education, baron Edouard Descamps (1847-1933), to appoint Cumont as Professor of Roman History clearly shows this response. In Belgian parliament Socialists like Emile Vandervelde (1866-1938) and Liberals like Eugène Count Goblet d’Alviella (1846-1925; who was both a scholar and a politician) quoted the publications of Cumont as the true reason for this refusal: ‘Serait-ce parce que son principal ouvrage a jeté un jour considérable sur certains côtés des origines de l’Eglise chrétienne? Il serait possible que cela ait suffi à lui valoir “l’animosité des dévôts”’.³³ During the affair, Cumont wrote to his mentor Hermann Diels: ‘... mes ennemis se sont empressés de publier dans la basse presse cléricale des articles contre les ‘erreurs’ de mes *Religions Orientales*.’ And in a private letter to his friend and colleague at Gent, Henri Pirenne (1862-1935), Cumont wrote that Charles Woeste (1837-1922), the notorious political leader of the Catholic Party, had read his work and supposedly reacted as follows: ‘il a consenti à reconnaître que je n’étais pas un imbécile mais il a ajouté immédiatement que j’étais d’autant plus dangereux’.³⁴

³² See the conference volume in the series of the Belgian Historical Institute in Rome, on *Science, religion and politics during the ‘modernist crisis’*, (3-5/06/2010) edited by Corinne Bonnet, Jan De Maeyer and Danny Praet, and planned for end 2014; especially the contributions by Corinne Bonnet sur ‘Les réactions face à l’affaire Cumont’, d’Annelies Lannoy sur ‘Le Congrès d’histoire du christianisme: Franz Cumont et Alfred Loisy face aux visages divers de l’histoire des religions indépendante’ et Danny Praet sur ‘L’affaire Cumont: idéologies et politique académique à l’université de Gand au cours de la crise moderniste.’

³³ Quoted in BONNET (2000), 18-19.

³⁴ Quoted in BONNET (2000), 22. The correspondence Cumont received is kept in the Academia Belgica. Scans of the entire corpus of more than 12.000 letters are freely available in the database by Corinne Bonnet, (<http://www.academiabelgica.it/index>), who published widely on the subject: Corinne BONNET, ed., *La correspondance scientifique de Franz Cumont conservée à L’Academia Belgica de Rome. Ed. et commentée par Corinne Bonnet*, Brussels / Rome, 1997 (Belgisch Historisch Instituut te Rome, Volume 35); EAD., ed., *Le ‘grand atelier de la science’: Franz Cumont et l’Altertumswissenschaft*:

Cumont published more or less elaborate comparisons between Mithraism and Christianity in the conclusions of his *Textes et Monuments relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*, edited in 1900 as a separate (and affordable) book under the title of *Les Mystères de Mithra*.³⁵ He had also made parallels in a number of Mithras-lemmata in scientific encyclopedias such as the *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* by Wilhelm Roscher, from 1897, and in 1904, in *Le Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* edited by Charles Daremberg and Edmond Saglio. It is remarkable that Cumont was much more prudent in the last of these publications in which he only talked about the 'safe' topic of parallels in the Mithraic and Early Christian art.³⁶

We will offer a commented translation of the single page in the Roscher-Lexikon in which he gave a summary of the parallels he discussed at greater length in his *Textes et Monuments* or *Mystères de Mithra*.³⁷

When the reader recapitulates what we have just said about the religion of Mithras, he will be surprised by the many similarities with Christianity. Just like the Christians the adherents of the Persian god lived in communities with a strong internal bond and they addressed each other as 'father' and 'brother'.³⁸ As the

héritages et émancipations. C. Bonnet; avec la collaboration de Carolin Huss; avec une préface de Luciano Canfora, Brussels / Rome, 2005 (*ibid.*, vol. 41). The letter to H. Diels (d.d. 26-08-1910) is published in BONNET (2005), letter 103, p. 89.

³⁵ CUMONT (2012) = (1956a), Chapter 6, 185-219: 'Mithraism and the religions of the Empire'.

³⁶ CUMONT (1904), 1954: in the section 'la lutte contre le christianisme', Cumont wrote, after stressing the syncretism and the inherent tolerance of Mithraism, and after having established a link with the religious politics of the emperor Aurelian (270-275), that the cult of Mithras inevitably had to enter into conflict with Christianity: 'La rivalité entre les deux religions fut d'autant plus vive que leurs caractères étaient plus semblables, et l'on peut dire que le mazdéisme, dont le culte mithriaque est une forme, fut avant l'islam, l'adversaire le plus redoutable que le christianisme ait rencontré. Nous n'avons pas à insister ici sur les similitudes, signalées par les apologistes eux-mêmes (note 5 contains the same references to SAINT JUSTIN, *Dial.* 70, *Apol.* 1, 66 and TERTULLIAN, *De corona* 15, *De praescr.* 40) qui existaient entre les dogmes et les rites chrétiens et mithriaques, ni surtout à trancher la question de savoir s'il y a eu imitation et de quel côté. Beaucoup d'analogies s'expliquent par l'origine orientale commune des deux cultes, et il n'y a guère que le domaine de l'art où l'on puisse constater avec certitude les emprunts faits par l'Eglise à ses prédécesseurs païens.' In note 6, Cumont referred to Jean RÉVILLE, *Etudes publiées en hommage à la faculté en Montauban*, 1901, p. 339 sq. et M.A. DIETERICH, *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 1902, p. 190, to state: 'les traditions chrétiennes relatives à la naissance de Jésus seraient influencées par la légende mithriaque.' But even this external reference is presented in the conditional and can thus not simply be taken as his own thought.

³⁷ CUMONT (1897), k. 3066-3067, in a section called 'Mithras und das Christentum'.

³⁸ Compare CUMONT (1956a), 190: 'The adepts of both formed secret conventicles, closely united, the members of which gave each themselves the names of "Brothers"',

Christians, they practiced a kind of baptism, a kind of communion and a kind of confirmation; just like the Christians they required their members to adhere to an ethical system based upon duties ('entolai': Julian, *Convivium* p. 336 C). Both Christians and Mithraists preached abstinence from meat (Porphyry, *De abstinentia* 4, 16) and chastity (Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 40), self-control and self-denial.

The social inclusiveness and the high morals, often quoted as elements of the superiority of ancient Christianity over other religions,³⁹ according to Cumont, were common to both Christianity and some Oriental Religions as Mithraism and the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus. The fact that Cumont referred to the *Convivium* or *Caesares* by the emperor Julian for the duties or commandments ('entolai') common to both Mithraism and Christianity is perhaps not as innocent as it seems. The passage comes at the very end of this text and is immediately preceded by the sarcastic scene in which Jesus promises salvation through baptism to all sinners and even to common criminals. This moral laxity is then suggested as the true motive for the conversion of the emperor Constantine, which in turn could imply that Cumont is in fact suggesting that Mithraism was in fact morally superior to Christianity, or at least certain aspects or certain manifestations of Christianity.⁴⁰ As we have noted, Cumont is known for his very indirect way of communicating his own views, and it is often impossible to establish what he really meant.

and the following note: 'I may remark that even the expression "dearest brothers" had already been used by the sectaries of Jupiter Dolichenus: *CIL* VI 406 = 30758: '*fratres carissimos et conlegas hon[estissimos]*' and probably also in the Mithraic associations.'

³⁹ See PRAET (1993), 45-52.

⁴⁰ JULIANUS IMP., *Convivium*, 336 C; translation by Wilmer CAVE WRIGHT. *Julian the Emperor*. Works, LCL, Vol. 2. London & Cambridge, MA. 1913: "As for you", Hermes said to me, "I have granted you the knowledge of your father Mithras. "As for Constantinus, he could not discover among the gods the model of his own career, but when he caught sight of Pleasure, who was not far off, he ran to her. She received him tenderly and embraced him, then after dressing him in raiment of many colours and otherwise making him beautiful, she led him away to Incontinence. There too he found Jesus, who had taken up his abode with her and cried aloud to all comers: "He that is a seducer, he that is a murderer, he that is sacrilegious and infamous, let him approach without fear! For with this water will I wash him and will straightway make him clean. And though he should be guilty of those same sins a second time, let him but smite his breast and beat his head and I will make him clean again." To him Constantinus came gladly, when he had conducted his sons forth from the assembly of the gods. But the avenging deities none the less punished both him and them for their impiety, and extracted the penalty for the shedding of the blood of their kindred, until Zeus granted them a respite for the sake of Claudius and Constantius. "Keep his commandments [entolai], and thus secure for yourself a cable and sure anchorage throughout your life, and when you must depart from the world you can with good hopes adopt him as your guardian god.""

Cumont not only believed Mithraism had a theology, but also that it was very similar to Christian theology. He continued his analysis of the parallels:

Just as the Christians, they told stories about a Flood, believed in the immortality of the soul, and in the resurrection of the bodies, in a heaven for the blessed and in a hell inhabited by evil powers. We have seen that the theology of the mysteries had made Mithras into the equivalent of the Alexandrian Logos, and we can assume that this was not the only parallel between Mithras and Christ. We can imagine that the figure of this god who undertook, much against his will, the task of killing the primeval bull to call to life the race of men, and redeem them from death, was compared to the figure of the Saviour who sacrificed himself for the salvation of the world. One can even find in the legends an adoration by the shepherds, a last supper and an ascension. Augustine, in his *In Johannis evangelium tractatus* 7, p. 1140 Migne, knew a priest of Mithras who used to say: 'et ipse Pileatus christianus est / and even the god with the Phrygian cap is Christian.' From the second century onwards (Celsus in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6, 21) pagan philosophers juxtaposed the Persian Mysteries and Christianity, apparently to prove the superiority of the former over the latter. On the other hand, ecclesiastical writers such as Justin Martyr (*Dialogus cum Tryphone* 70, 78; *Apologia* 1, 66) and Tertullian (*De Corona* 15; *De praescriptione haereticorum* 40) persisted in their point of view that the analogies between the two religions should be explained as imitations by the devil.⁴¹ We cannot further discuss here the almost insoluble question of the mutual influences between these two cults,⁴² but we will limit our analysis to the observation that the similarities in their teachings will have made the battle between the service of Mithras and Christianity even fiercer. No doubt, Christianity never had to face an adversary who was more dangerous than the cult of Mithras. We would not go as far as Ernest Renan, who said (*Marc Aurèle ou la fin du monde antique*, p. 579): 'If Christendom had been checked in its growth by some deadly disease, the world would have become Mithraic.'⁴³

⁴¹ Compare RENAN (1881), 577: 'Ses ressemblances avec le christianisme étaient si frappantes, que saint Justin et Tertullien y voient un plagiat satanique. Le mithriacisme avait le baptême, l'eucharistie, les agapes, la pénitence, les expiations, les onctions. Il créait un lien de fraternité entre les initiés. Nous l'avons dit vingt fois, c'était là le grand besoin du temps.'

⁴² German original, CUMONT (1897), k. 3067: 'Ohne hier der fast unlösbare Frage nach der gegenseitige Beeinflussung der beiden Kulte näher zu treten...' Compare CUMONT (1956a), 194: 'We cannot presume to unravel to-day a question which divided contemporaries and which shall doubtless forever remain insoluble.'

⁴³ German original, CUMONT (1897), k. 3067: 'Sicherlich ist dieses auf keinen gefährlicheren Gegner gestossen als den Mithraskult. Ohne so weit zu gehen, dass wir mit RENAN (*Marc Aurèle* p. 579) sagen: "Si le christianisme eût été arrêté dans sa croissance par quelque maladie mortelle, le monde eût été mithriaste", kann man sich doch fragen, ob nicht im Anfange des dritten Jahrhunderts die Anhänger des persischen Gottes zahlreicher und mächtiger waren, als die Glaubigen Jesu. Aber die ersten Einfälle der Barbaren – besonders der Verlust Daciens (256 und 275 n. Chr.) und bald darauf der des

Cumont in fact turned Renan's boutade around by arguing that, not Christianity but Mithraism 'had been checked in its growth by some deadly disease.' He continued his analysis by saying that 'one could ask whether, in the beginning of the third century, the adherents of the Persian god were not more numerous and more powerful than the people who believed in Jesus.' But whereas the latter was primarily an urban and a Mediterranean phenomenon, Mithraism had become very popular with the army and made its greatest progress in the frontier-provinces where the army was stationed. The crisis around the middle of the third century, and the loss of these frontier provinces were in Cumont's analysis the political and military reasons why Mithraism lost its momentum in the religious conquest of the Roman Empire. 'The first barbarian invasions – especially the loss of Dacia (in AD 256 and 275) and soon thereafter of the Agri Decumates delivered to this religion, which had enjoyed its greatest expansion along the borders of the Empire, a formidable blow.'

7. Political support and strategic alliances between the Oriental Religions

In this passage Cumont seems to adopt a duelist approach to the conversion of the Roman Empire. In *Les Mystères* he also wrote: 'Mithraism reached the apogee of its power toward the middle of the third century, and it appeared for a moment as if the world was on the verge of becoming Mithraic.'⁴⁴ Although Cumont thought higher of Mithraism than of any other Oriental Religion, we will see that he always thought of Mithraism as competing against Christianity together or at least in association with other Oriental cults. We have already mentioned his reference to the 'dearest brothers' in the cult for Jupiter Dolichenus as a parallel for the Mithraic sense of belonging, and he also remarked that Dolichena and Mithraea were often found next to each other: 'Jupiter Dolichenus, who was worshipped simultaneously with Mithra in Commagene, the land of his origin, and who like the latter remained a preeminently military divinity, is found by his side in all the countries of the Occident.'⁴⁵ A similar observation was made about Mithraea and sanctuaries for Attis and Cybele, another 'ally' of Mithras. Here Cumont added the hypothesis that the Oriental Religions (who had no known central leadership or communication-structure) somehow implemented a political expansion-strategy:

Dekumatenlandes (Marquardt 1², 278) brachten dieser Religion, die besonders an den Grenzen des Reiches sehr verbreitet war einen furchtbaren Schlag bei.'

⁴⁴ CUMONT (1956a), 199.

⁴⁵ CUMONT (1956a), 178.

In the union of Mithra and Anahita the counterpart was found of the intimacy between the great indigenous divinities Attis and Cybele, and this harmony between the two sacred couples persisted in Italy. The most ancient mithræum known to us was contiguous to the *metroon* of Ostia, and we have every reason to believe that the worship of the Iranian god and that of the Phrygian goddess were conducted in intimate communion with each other throughout the entire extent of the empire. Despite the profound differences of their character, political reasons drew them together. In conciliating the priests of the *Mater Magna*, the sectaries of Mithra obtained the support of a powerful and officially recognized clergy, and so shared in some measure in the protection afforded it by the State. Further, since men only were permitted to take part in the secret ceremonies of the Persian liturgy, other Mysteries to which women were admitted must have formed some species of alliance with the former, to make them complete. The Great Mother succeeded thus to the place of Anahita; she had her *Matres* or 'Mothers', as Mithra had his 'Fathers'; and her initiates were known among one another as 'Sisters', just as the votaries of her associate called one another 'Brothers'.⁴⁶

There is no real reason to believe the adherents of the cult of Attis and Cybele were exclusively or predominantly female, and one might no longer agree that the cults 'must have formed' alliances to increase their market share, but we believe the teleological and dialectical structure of Cumont's thought saw in this aggregate of two cults, one for each sex, one with a goddess who overshadowed her male consort, and one for a male god who outshone his original spouse, a logical stage before the triumph of the Church uniting men and women in one structure.

During the restoration efforts by the emperor Aurelian, the Mithras cult obtained another ally. Although the Sun God of Emesa was the primary focus of the official cult of Sol Invictus, 'nevertheless, the *Sol invictus*, whom the emperor had intended to honor with a pomp hitherto unheard of, could well be claimed as their own by the followers of Mithra.'⁴⁷ The imperial support for Mithras was proportional to its success with the troops and with the importance of the army for the struggling Empire. The final stage was when Diocletian and Galerius pronounced Sol Invictus Mithras protector of the Empire at the Emperors conference in Carnuntum in 307. But the Empire had 'orientalized' by then, in the sense that it had become totalitarian and almost theocratic. As Cumont remarked, Diocletian and the Tetrarchy imitated the Sassanids in almost every way. Mithraism too had changed. In the beginning of the chapter on 'Mithras and the religions of the Empire', the Belgian scholar had underlined that Mithraism in the Roman Empire, unlike its cousin in Persia, was tolerant:

The Acts of the Oriental martyrs bear eloquent testimony to the intolerance of the national clergy of the Persia of the Sassanids; and the Magi of the Ancient Empire,

⁴⁶ CUMONT (1956a), 67 and 179 (quoted).

⁴⁷ CUMONT (1956a), 186.

if they were not persecutors, at least constituted an exclusive caste, and possibly even a privileged race. The priests of Mithra afford no evidence of having assumed a like attitude. Like the Judaism of Alexandria, Mazdaism had been softened in Asia Minor by the Hellenic civilization.

But at the end of the chapter, Cumont would no longer rule out categorically that 'the new Mithraism', which had formed an alliance with the soldier emperors, had become a persecutor: 'The Christians believed, not without some appearance of reason, that the Mithraic clergy were the instigators of the great persecutions under Galerius.'⁴⁸

As we said, Cumont never fully discussed the spread of Christianity in the Roman World. He did however write briefly about the next phase in the relations between religion, politics and violence. 'But the conversion of Constantine shattered the hopes which the policy of his predecessors had held out to the worshippers of the sun.'⁴⁹ The next emperors increased the hostility but for Cumont the simple withdrawal of imperial support was sufficient for the demise of Mithraism. We should wonder why this is? He emphasized that Christianity saw Mithraism as its main opponent and of course suggested that the Christians might have remembered the real or imaginary role Mithraism had played in the Great Persecution. But it seems as if Cumont thought the outcome was already known at the beginning of the fourth century. The so-called 'réaction païenne' at the end of the fourth century saw a final alliance between the Oriental cults. According to Cumont, the old enmity between Egypt and Persia had prevented the adherents of Isis and Osiris from venerating Mithras, but now they all formed a united front: 'In the common peril threatening them, those cults, formerly rivals, had become reconciled and regarded themselves as divisions and, so to speak, congregations, of the same church.'⁵⁰ But even this "united church of paganism" could not change the inevitable evolution of religious thought, and in fact paganism itself had been transformed beyond recognition. As Cumont had already announced in his preface to *Religions Orientales*: 'The faith of the friends of Symmachus was much farther removed from the religious ideal of Augustus, although they would never have admitted it, than that of their opponents in the senate.'⁵¹

⁴⁸ CUMONT (1956a), 175 and 200.

⁴⁹ CUMONT (1956a), 200.

⁵⁰ CUMONT (2006), 305: 'Dans le péril commun qui les menace, les cultes autrefois rivaux se sont réconciliés et se regardent comme des divisions d'une même église, dont leurs clergés forment, si j'ose dire, les congrégations.' = CUMONT (1956b), 205.

⁵¹ CUMONT (2006), 14 = CUMONT (1956a), 24.

8. From worship of the elements to supra-natural spirituality

The so-called pagan church composed of the Oriental Religions were linked to nature worship by Firmicus Maternus, as Cumont reminded his readers. In his *On the error of the profane religions*, this ex-astrologer

[...] connected them with the four elements. The Egyptians were the worshippers of water: the water of the Nile fertilizing their country; the Phrygians of the earth, which was to them the Great Mother of everything; the Syrians and Carthaginians of the air, which they adored under the name of celestial Juno; the Persians of fire, to which they attributed preeminence over the other three principles. (...) Each one of them was especially consecrated to one of the elements which in combination form the universe. Their union constituted the pantheistic religion of the deified world.⁵²

In the *Mysteries of Mithras*, Cumont had already concluded that Christianity was superior to the Oriental Religions because it had surpassed the worship of nature, even in the symbolic-scientific guise of mystery-gods personifying the elements.⁵³ As we have argued elsewhere,⁵⁴ the very structure of the synthesis study *The Oriental Religions in the Roman Empire* is a reference to a progressive evolution of religious thought through a historical series of religions venerating the elements. Cumont presented his chapters as chronological but they are rather ordered according to a hierarchy between the elements,⁵⁵ from the heaviest and the least active to the lightest and the most active. The first chapter discussed Cybele or earth. Isis or water was presented in the second chapter. Next came the Syrian Baals or gods of thunder and air. And Cumont gave the fourth position to the Persian cult of fire. But his final phase of paganism was what he called astral religion, and this was discussed in a fifth chapter which surpassed the description of Oriental Religions proper, but also went beyond the four sublunary elements to include aether as the fifth element in the religious evolution of paganism. In every sense of the word, this was the final phase of paganism, understood as the worship of nature, because nature worship could not have become more immaterial. The focus of this last pagan anthropology and theology was on the astral origin of the soul, the core of their beliefs was moral, connected to returning to the stars. The astral origin of the soul linked all people with one another, and linked the soul with the whole

⁵² CUMONT (2006), 305 = CUMONT (1956a), 205.

⁵³ CUMONT (1956a), 198: 'The Christian doctrine, which broke with the cults of nature, remained exempt from these impure associations, and its liberation from every compromising attachment assured it an immense superiority.'

⁵⁴ PRAET (2011), and (2012).

⁵⁵ PRAET (2011), 139-141 and (2012), 200-202.

universe, in an 'objective', be it pseudo-scientific way. Cumont's last phase of paganism was a universal, moral religion and, as we have seen, he conceived of it as of a church.

The history of the spread of the Oriental Mystery Religions as Cumont presented it was thus a sort of initiation process of mankind, a historical purification of religious thought through the five elements, through which man realized that true religion should not be about the local, the ritual and the material, but about the spiritual, the moral and the universal. On the social and the political level, there was an evolution towards individual religious free choice in both the Oriental Mystery Cults and in Christianity. The latter would set the next step in the progress towards freedom by its criticism of astrology, thus cutting the links between religion and (pseudo-)science. All this could be read, as Cumont explicitly wrote, as a 'praeparatio evangelica', but some of Cumont's Christian contemporaries were not pleased with his explicit reference to Late Antique Christianity as the next logical step in the history of the human spirit because they could infer Cumont had not intended to present it as the last.

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