

Introduction

1. Religious Transformations in Nineteenth-Century Europe

Framed within the long nineteenth century, this volume focuses on individuals who, over the course of their lives, distanced themselves from their original religious communities, whether by aligning with other groups or by seeking to reform and transform their communities from within¹. We interpret such processes as moments of transition and border crossing, and we aim to uncover and interpret forms of religious behavior against the broader backdrop of processes of »secularization«². Rather than treating secularization as a linear or clear-cut process of religious decline, we explore how the emergence of a more secularized society created space for innovation and creativity. Following Charles Taylor's and other scholars' insights, we assume that religion retained a strong formative and generative power even in modern contexts, remaining compatible with some of the tenets of modernity. In this sense, secularization may be understood not simply as a process that highlights the decline of religious observance and practice, but possibly as a path of transformation through which religious motifs and meanings continue to exert influence, even beyond the bounds of traditional religious institutions³.

The period under investigation is the *long nineteenth century*, a time in which expressions of religiosity and religious belonging arguably underwent profound and sustained transformations. These changes constitute a fundamental process in the formation of modern European societies. Not only did a form of »diffusive Christianity«⁴ began to take shape, but new modes of institutionalized and non-institutional religions also emerged. This pluralization of religion and religious experience in Europe has been described as a »constant expansion of the universe

1 The gender-related formulations used in the chapters correspond to the preference of the respective authors.

2 The debate on secularization is vast. See especially Phil ZUCKERMAN/John SHOOK (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, Oxford 2017; Karel DOBBELAERE, *Secularization. An Analysis at Three Levels*, Brussels 2002.

3 Charles TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge/London 2007.

4 John WOLFFE, *God and Greater Britain. Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945*, London 1994, pp. 92f.

of religion⁵. At the same time, the social function of religion – particularly its public visibility – and the institutional authority of Christian churches began to diminish or, depending on distinctive cases, to be openly questioned. These changes were driven by complex processes such as industrialization, the ascendancy of the natural sciences, the rise of nation-states, and mass migration. As a result, the nineteenth century witnessed a significant cultural shift: for the first time, the secular and the religious were publicly and explicitly negotiated⁶.

The modern world, with its reconfigurations of authority and cultural identity, opened new avenues for individuals to pursue distinct personal and spiritual projects. Taking these developments as a point of departure, this volume seeks to explore the interwoven processes of »secularization« and religious revitalization on the micro-historical level. By examining individual trajectories, we seek to integrate micro-historical and macro-historical perspectives, analyzing how broader societal changes or policy shifts shaped personal choices and life paths. The case studies presented in this volume therefore ask to what extent such moments of transition and boundary crossing are best understood as expressions of secularization, transformations of religious contexts, or the emergence of new forms of religiosity.

Such an inquiry however necessitates a theoretical grounding – an understanding of what we mean by *secularization*, especially when approached as a plural and multifaceted process. Indeed, one of the most influential narratives in the study of religion in the long nineteenth century has been shaped by the concept of secularization – understood in its legal, philosophical, and sociological dimensions⁷. Secularization has been one of the most intensely debated issues in the humanities for at least five decades, particularly since Peter Berger's pioneering work *The Sacred Canopy*⁸. Scholars have long argued both for and against the validity of secularization as a concept, and even among those who accept its use, there is considerable disagreement over its nature, whether it represents a long-term, gradual decline or a sudden collapse in the relevance of religion⁹.

5 Kurt NOWAK, *Geschichte des Christentums in Deutschland. Religion, Politik und Gesellschaft vom Ende der Aufklärung bis zur Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 1995, p. 11. In the German original: »ständige Erweiterung des Universums der Religion«.

6 Rebekka HABERMAS, *Kulturkämpfer, Wundergläubige und Atheisten. Das lange 19. Jahrhundert und die Erfindung des Säkularen*, in: Birgit ASCHMANN (ed.), *Durchbruch der Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main 2019, pp. 147–170, at p. 148.

7 Daniele MENOZZI, *La chiesa cattolica e la secolarizzazione*, Turin 1993; TAYLOR, *Secular Age*; for criticism, see Talal ASAD, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford, CA 2003.

8 Peter L. BERGER, *The Sacred Canopy*, New York, NY 1967.

9 David NASH, *Believing in Secularization. Stories of Decline, Potential, and Resurgence*, in: *Journal of Religious History* 41/4 (2017), pp. 505–531.

It is worth mentioning that a significant part of this interpretive paradigm developed in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of World War II, amid the reorganization of liberal democracies in the west and in parallel with the ideological pressures of the Cold War. This evolution was also driven by the reception and adaptation of European sociological thought – especially the works of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim – within the United States. It is not surprising, then, that the conceptualization of secularization became a key reference point in American sociology, particularly as American society was undergoing profound structural changes. This sociological lens inherited the preoccupations of its European predecessors, who had been chiefly concerned with the consequences of »modernity«. Though neither Durkheim nor Weber conceptualized secularization as such, they were deeply interested in the transformations of society through the overlapping influences of modern science, technology, new forms of statehood and legal rationality, individual rights, and the impact of industrialization and capitalism. In one word, it was the relationship of traditional modes of thought with »modern rationality« (Weber) that attracted attention, and called for analysis and understanding. Moreover, modernity itself was never a fully neutral or uncontested concept. It brought with it a series of deep ambivalences, many of which were inadequately addressed by modernization theorists, the foundational thinkers of twentieth-century sociology. Issues such as racism and the dual nature of the modern state – as both an agent of emancipation and a perpetrator of systemic violence – exemplify this theoretical blind spot¹⁰.

As noted by some critics, the debate surrounding secularization has often been shaped less by empirical findings than by the narrative logic embedded in the theory itself. In this way, secularization has come to function as an ideology – or even as a secular form of belief – used alternately by its detractors and defenders¹¹. Moreover, a growing consensus has emerged that the original formulation of the secularization thesis – namely, that modernity inevitably leads to the progressive decline of religious belief and practice – amounts to a myth more than a historical reality¹². Critics have also pointed to the limited scope of traditional secularization theories, which are often based exclusively on western, and particularly Christian, societies. They leave out not only non-western contexts but also the complex internal diversity

10 Post-colonial and post-modern critics have highlighted these questions. See ASAD, *Formations*; Edward SAID, *Orientalism*, New York, NY 1978. The collapse of the liberal state called for a re-description of religion, which is worth remembering, in particular in the work of Eric Voegelin. For a definition of Ersatz religions, see Eric VOEGELIN, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Washington, DC 1997. On Voegelin and religion see: Ted V. McALLISTER, *Revolt against Modernity*. Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and the Search for a Postliberal Order, Lawrence, KS 1995.

11 NASH, *Believing*, pp. 505–531.

12 José CASANOVA, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, IL/London 1994, p. 11.

of religious expression within the west itself¹³. Hence, some scholars suggested to discard it, as the concept is too polemical and of scarce heuristic value¹⁴.

This realization does not require that all secularization theories be rejected wholesale. It remains evident that, in many modern societies, institutional religion plays a more subdued and less commanding role than it once did. Religion is frequently contested, subverted, or displaced, but not necessarily eradicated. Instead of a narrative of disappearance, scholars increasingly recognize processes of religious transformation, pluralization, and reconfiguration.

In line with recent research, we treat »secularization« as a multifaceted and context-dependent phenomenon, an evolving set of processes that unfold through diverse mechanisms. Particularly influential here is Charles Taylor's tripartite conceptualization of the secular: 1) the emptying of public spaces of overt religious references; 2) the decline of belief and practice; and 3) the transformation of the conditions in which belief is held and experienced. It is this third dimension – the changing conditions of belief – that forms one of the core foci of our volume. We are interested not in secularization as the triumph of atheism or the erasure of religion, but in the emergence of non-institutional, personalized, and creative forms of belief that remained deeply religious in nature, even as they broke with tradition.

Some scholars now define secularization not as a singular process but as a constellation of related trajectories. It is not a uniform development, but a complex and often contradictory interplay of forces that require close empirical and conceptual scrutiny. From this perspective, the individual becomes a key site for analysis. Biographical case studies allow us to trace how broader structural changes – scientific, political, institutional – interact with personal belief systems and choices. Indeed, for many of the individuals studied here, atheism was less a destination than a challenge to be resisted or reconciled with. The religious transformations these individuals experienced rarely resulted in complete abandonment of belief. Rather, they often led to the creation or adoption of new, hybrid spiritual frameworks shaped by personal, philosophical, and socio-political influences. This micro-historical approach reflects the insight that personal trajectories often intersect with broader historical currents, whether local, national, or transnational. As Oscar Handlin noted, the purpose of studying biography is »not simply to tell a life story [...] but to deploy the individual in the study of the world outside that individual and to

13 A recent body of literature has focused on the impact of secularization in non-western countries, such as India (an early player in this debate) of the middle east. Interesting and overlooked the question of how religious minorities in the west coped with the rise and spread of modernity. For some reading on Jews, see for instance: Ari JOSKOWICZ/Ethan KATZ (eds.), *Secularism in Question. Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, Philadelphia, PA 2015.

14 Ian HUNTER, *Secularization. The Birth of a Modern Combat Concept*, in: *Modern Intellectual History* 12/1 (2014), pp. 1–32.

explore how the private informs the public and vice versa¹⁵. The figures examined in this volume did not merely experience religious transformation; when possible, they actively contributed to reshaping religious life in their societies.

Of some heuristic value might be the notion of »invisible religion« elaborated by Thomas Luckmann, according to which the modern search for meaning and salvation had withdrawn to the private sphere¹⁶. While his model may have overstated the retreat of religious institutions, his emphasis on the private and the individual remains highly relevant. Our volume does not deny the continued relevance of institutions, but it foregrounds the decisive role played by individual agency in shaping, resisting, or reinterpreting religious meaning in modern contexts.

Through the lives of individuals who crossed religious boundaries, transformed traditions from within, or forged new spiritual paths, we aim to trace how the changing conditions of belief in the long nineteenth century manifested themselves in concrete lives. In doing so, we move beyond simplistic binaries of belief and unbelief, religion and secularism, and instead offer a more nuanced picture of religious transformation in modernity.

The concept of secularization is shaped by disciplinary boundaries and interpretative frames. Some definitions are narrowly legalistic, referring to the transfer of Church property and power to secular institutions. Other ones are more philosophical, describing a historical shift from a worldview grounded in belief in God to one founded on human reason. A third perspective – largely sociological – focuses on the transformation of social structures in response to modern pressures. Depending on the angle of analysis, the meaning and implications of secularization shift accordingly. Often, these perspectives are used in combination, even if they originate from distinct intellectual traditions.

From a historical point of view, it is essential to keep in mind the overt processes of secularizing policies – such as the expropriation of ecclesiastical properties and the framing of church/state relations – whilst delving into the layers of nineteenth-century culture and society to uncover patterns of transformation and continuity. In this light, the distinction between premodern and modern Christian societies becomes more visible, their display of public roles and visibility being clearly modified, if compared to the past. Even when religion was not openly attacked as a vestige of the past to be eradicated, it was increasingly perceived as something to be reformed, privatized, or marginalized. In one word, it was at the centre of intellectual debate.

15 Oscar HANDLIN, *Truth in History*, Cambridge, MA 1979, p. 276.

16 Thomas LUCKMANN, *The Invisible Religion. The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, New York, NY 1967.

The intellectual and cultural history of the nineteenth century presents indeed a complex set of discourses on religion¹⁷. The critique of religion was a well-established feature of Enlightenment thought, but outright calls for the abolition of religion were rare prior to the French and Bolshevik revolutions¹⁸. During the French Revolution, attitudes toward religion were deeply ambivalent: while attempts to dismantle the Catholic Church's power were widespread and radical, religion itself was often viewed as a useful tool for social cohesion. The effort to eradicate the Catholic Church ultimately led not to a linear path of secularization but to prolonged conflict and often violent outbursts. It is within these dynamics of conflict that scholars might search for a better understanding of how religion worked in the long nineteenth century¹⁹.

Several nineteenth-century philosophies often considered anti-religious – such as Positivism – gave rise to movements that took on quasi-religious forms. Auguste Comte's »religion of humanity«, for instance, was lately described as an *Ersatzreligion*, a surrogate religion that illustrates the complexity of the era's spiritual landscape²⁰. These intricate intellectual trajectories and political developments call for a more nuanced analytical approach – one that examines how religious groups responded to the pressures and transformations brought about by modernization. By incorporating concepts such as resistance/resilience, adaptation, and indifference, we can better understand the diverse and sometimes unexpected ways in which religious actors navigated the challenges of modernity.

The Catholic Church offers a salient example of resistance to the paths of modernization. In the wake of the 1848 revolutions, it responded with institutional rigidity and ideological retrenchment, most famously expressed in the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), a document that strongly rejected liberal values. Even while under pressure – as seen in Germany's *Kulturkampf* or the loss of the Papal States following the *Breccia di Porta Pia* in Italy – the Church adapted in enduring ways. It consolidated its internal structures, reasserted its authority, and invested in the

17 We refrain here to refer to the debate over the notion of »religion«, because intellectuals, politicians, and cultural activists operating in the nineteenth century held many different views about it, from a very narrow notion of religion as Christianity to a broader notion that incorporated different traditions.

18 Christopher A. BAYLY, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914*, Oxford 2004.

19 Jürgen OSTERHAMMEL, *The Transformation of the World. A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton, NJ 2014, chapter 18.

20 For this definition see Eric Voegelin, fn. 9. Also, for the concept of »political religion« see Emilio GENTILE, *Le religioni della politica. Fra democrazie e totalitarismi*, Roma/Bari 2001. For a critical view on the notion of »political religion« see: Hans MAIER, *Political Religion. The Potentials and Limitations of a Concept*, in: Hans MAIER/Michael SCHÄFER (eds.), *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, vol. II, London/New York, NY 2007, pp. 225–245.

development of new devotional geographies. At the same time, it strategically focused its influence on specific areas such as education and the economy²¹. On the one hand, the Catholic Church constructed a mythic vision of a sacred Christian society rooted in the medieval past; on the other, it selectively embraced modern technologies and political tools to counter a modernity it partly despised. This conservative ideology – often described as *integrist* – was not universally accepted. It left space for individual believers to be drawn toward the transformations brought about by science, philosophy, and politics. This volume explores several of these individual cases, offering insight into the tensions between resistance and change within Catholic contexts.

In contrast, the concept of adaptation more aptly describes the attitudes of groups or individuals who welcomed the opportunities of a changing world. Many such examples come from religious minorities – Jews and Protestants in Catholic countries, or Catholics and Jews in Protestant ones – who, after centuries of marginalization, found new avenues for social and political participation. Religious diversity in certain regions also facilitated greater integration into modern society, including access to professions and political roles previously closed to them²². The rise of *denominationalism* among Jews and the emergence of liberal and progressive movements among Christians reflected broader reformist agendas. These movements sought to integrate and improve their communities' standing in modern society. Such reformist impulses crossed confessional and geographic boundaries, reaching well beyond the Christian or western world. As this volume illustrates, these trends brought recognition to a new generation of religious leaders, reformers, and founders of new spiritual movements. In Asia, for example, religious figures engaged critically with the west, which they viewed as overly materialistic and lacking spiritual direction.

Yet, indifference to the changes brought by modernity also played a role, though this theme is not explored in this volume. It is important to note that religious enclaves resisting modernization were more widespread than often assumed. Choosing to live at the margins of mainstream society, guided by alternative norms and values, remained a viable path, one that merits further study. Groups such as the Old Believers in the Russian Empire, Mennonites in various countries, or Chassidic Jews exemplify such cultural enclaves. Leaving these groups was possible, though often at significant personal cost. What these communities reveal is a deep-seated skepticism toward the claims and promises of modern society.

21 Of some use Giovanni MICCOLI, *Fra mito della cristianità e secolarizzazione. Studi sul rapporto chiesa-società nell'età contemporanea*, Genova 1992.

22 Roberto DAGNINO/Alessandro GRAZI (eds.), *Believers in the Nation. European Religious Minorities in the Age of Nationalism (1815–1914)*, Leuven 2017.

The individual trajectories explored in this volume predominantly reflect the adaptation model, which highlights the creative reworking of the profound changes that characterized the long nineteenth century. These intellectual paths illustrate both the opportunities and the challenges of their historical moment, often signaling moments of rupture and transformation. While many of the figures discussed are European intellectuals, we have deliberately adopted a more global and entangled perspective, including Asian thinkers who actively promoted their own visions of modernity. This broader lens is particularly evident in the authors featured in the first section of the book. Notably, many of the voices in this volume belong to Jews, one of the religious minorities granted political emancipation during the nineteenth century. Their experiences, along with those of Catholics and Protestants who distanced themselves from traditional religious structures, reveal a diverse range of responses to the shifting religious and political landscape. This volume showcases viewpoints that move well beyond the confines of identity politics, highlighting instead a spectrum of political engagement and religious creativity that was often indebted to utopian and progressive world-views.

2. Structure of the Book

To illuminate the various patterns of religious transformation in the nineteenth century, the volume is organized into four thematic directions. Each centers on emblematic figures whose individual paths reflect wider cultural, political, and intellectual trends.

The first thematic session concerns key figures, whose religious transformation acted as a *trait d'union* between the individual and the global in two different ways: 1) in an actual geo-cultural dimension, through the impact in western religious culture caused by the Indian guru Swami Vivekananda; 2) in theoretical intellectual terms, through Luigi Luzzatti's attempt at formulating a global theory of religious freedom.

In fact, in the book's first section, Ruth Harris offers a vast and deep reflection on how the concept of religious transformation in the individual could help us understand key intellectual, cultural, and political re-alignments. She argues that the western turn to »eastern spirituality« – with its gurus, meditation, and yearning for »self-realization« – would not have been possible without Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who gained international fame at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Vivekananda is shown not only as a key figure in rearticulating Hinduism for western audiences but also as someone whose vision attracted committed female followers. Vivekananda's global enterprise was underpinned by an unusual collaboration between »traditional« women in India and avant-garde female activists and intellectuals in the west. Harris claims that, without their help,

he would never have been able to press for cultural relativism, open new spiritual horizons, let alone fund institutions at home and abroad. The essay challenges the established notion that the nineteenth-century »feminization of religion« was a purely western Christian phenomenon. While many scholars have focused on the dominance of women in Christian missions and philanthropy, this chapter explores how *Hindu universalism* – especially as promoted by Swami Vivekananda – provided an alternative religious framework that deeply engaged women in both India and the west. Women such as Sara Bull, Josephine MacLeod, and Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita) were central to his mission. Their spiritual journeys involved significant religious transformation, moving from disillusionment with Christianity toward a reconfigured sense of faith through Vedanta and yoga. These women played complex roles: they were not merely disciples, but intermediaries between east and west, funders, organizers, and advocates. They engaged deeply with Indian thought, often interpreting it through Christian or Unitarian lenses, and brought their own spiritual traditions into conversation with Vivekananda's teachings. The essay emphasizes that religious transformation was not unidirectional or easily categorized. This cross-cultural spiritual engagement reveals that the feminization of religion in the nineteenth century was far more complex than previously understood: it was transnational, often contradictory, and mediated through intensely personal, spiritual relationships that blurred boundaries of gender, race, and religious authority.

Similarly, a global perspective on religion in the nineteenth century is provided by Cristiana Facchini's contribution on Luigi Luzzatti (1841–1927). A Jewish-born Italian economist, politician, and prime minister, Luzzatti was a leading liberal thinker who advanced a global theory of religious tolerance. Luzzatti, though not a theologian or historian of religion, played a key role in shaping modern Italy's legal and constitutional framework, particularly regarding the relationship between church and state. Framing the essay are two symbolic moments of global religious dialogue: the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and a 1908 meeting in Rome between Luzzatti and Japanese scholar Anesaki Masaharu. These events highlight the transnational and intercultural dimensions of the period's religious discourse, setting the stage for Luzzatti's own pluralistic approach. Though born into Judaism, Luzzatti distanced himself from formal religious practice early in life, embracing instead a liberal, theistic worldview that drew upon diverse spiritual traditions. His political career and academic engagement were shaped by Enlightenment values, constitutional liberalism, and a profound interest in religious diversity, including Asian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. In his *God in Freedom*, published in English in 1930, Luzzatti advanced a comparative theory of religious liberty that challenged Eurocentric models. He highlighted historical examples of religious tolerance not only in Christian Europe and America (e. g., Roger Williams and the U.S. Constitution), but also in India (Emperor Ashoka),

Persia (Bahá'í faith), and Mughal India (Emperor Akbar). For Luzzatti, religious freedom arose not from indifference or hostility towards religion, but from sincere religious belief itself, a conviction that God desires to be worshipped in many ways. He argued that true religious liberty involves not simply toleration, but a principled, constitutional separation of church and state rooted in mutual respect.

Luzzatti's eclectic and inclusive approach drew upon both modern constitutional theory and ancient religious traditions, asserting that Asia had pioneered the ideals of religious liberty long before Europe. Facchini situates Luzzatti within broader nineteenth-century trends: the global circulation of religious ideas, the institutionalization of religious studies, the politicization of the »Jewish question«, and the modern state's role in regulating religion. She also reflects on Luzzatti's personal religiosity, which she describes as a form of ethical theism, a non-dogmatic faith grounded in moral responsibility and openness to spiritual pluralism. Ultimately, Luzzatti emerges as a deeply modern thinker, one who used the tools of constitutional law, religious scholarship, and political liberalism to craft a vision of religious freedom that was at once historical, global, and urgently relevant in his time.

The second direction takes us to France, the country that had witnessed the French revolution and intense debates and policies aimed to counter and contain the power of the Catholic Church and where the policies of secularization were most radical. Here, we will observe the intertwinements between intellectuals associated with Judaism and the socialist utopian philosophy of Saint-Simonism, which exerted a relevant role in addressing French culture. In doing so, however, we will focus on two intellectuals, Joseph Salvador and Olinde Benjamin Rodrigues, who both argued for a future universal »religion of humanity«.

In this section, Alessandro Grazi explores and unravels some of the mechanisms with which Saint-Simonism favored the transition of originally religious elements into a secular frame, particularly for its Jewish members. Saint-Simonism, rooted in Enlightenment ideals and shaped after the death of its founder Henri de Saint-Simon, proposed a »New Christianity« or »Religion of Humanity«, as it was called by his disciples, grounded in moral unity, fraternity, social harmony, and the emancipation of all, including women and workers. Although secular in structure, it retained a strong religious vocabulary and ritual form, which drew many Jewish intellectuals into its orbit. The essay argues that Saint-Simonism enabled a secular re-appropriation of religious (particularly Jewish) motifs, offering a universalistic, spiritual, and ethically grounded worldview that appealed to liberal Jews in post-Revolutionary France. Grazi tests his observations about the relationship Judaism/Saint-Simonism through the exemplary case of Olinde Benjamin Rodrigues (1795–1891), a French Jewish mathematician and a prominent member of Paris' first Saint-Simonian circle. Individuals like Rodrigues often recently emancipated and deeply shaped by the values of Enlightenment, saw Saint-Simonism as a way to recast their Jewish identity in secular, ethical, and political terms. The movement

allowed them to retain a sense of moral mission, universal justice, and even messianic expectation – central features of Jewish tradition – without remaining within the confines of institutional Judaism. Rodrigues's personal trajectory is analyzed as a case study of this dynamic. Though he distanced himself from traditional Judaism and rejected both Christianity and atheism, he embraced Saint-Simonism as his new spiritual identity. In doing so, he interpreted Saint-Simon's »religion of humanity« as a continuation – and secularization – of Judaism's ethical and prophetic heritage. Rodrigues's transformation, Grazi argues, reflects one possible mode of secularization, in which religious motifs persist and evolve within a new, non-institutional spiritual framework.

The second contribution of this section focuses on Joseph Salvador (1796–1873), the French Jewish polygraph who authored several books on ancient Judaism and the historical Jesus²³. In nineteenth-century France, intellectuals like Joseph Salvador responded to the waning of Enlightenment ideals by proposing a new, syncretic religiosity that blended Judaism and Christianity into a universal moral vision grounded in historical progress and divine revelation. Rather than merely reconciling traditions, Salvador reinterpreted them as stages of a unified spiritual evolution. According to Alberto Scigliano, in Salvador's view Moses' figure would justify a novel significance of Jewish values within the political, prophetic and utopian debate of the early nineteenth century. Salvador's ideas had a robust influence on Saint-Simonian thinkers, who believed that the notion of a universal religion based on Mosaism is the fulfillment of Judaism's political mission. Joseph Salvador's vision of *Mosaism* was a utopian, universalist reinterpretation of Judaism, grounded in biblical tradition and shaped by Romantic sensibilities. He rejected rabbinic and nationalist frameworks, instead presenting Moses and the Decalogue as the ethical and legal foundation for a future universal religion. This syncretic religion would transcend traditional faiths and promote societal progress, positioning the Jewish people not as a political nation but as a messianic moral force advancing humanity. Salvador interpreted Mosaic law as a divine precursor to modern democratic ideals, particularly the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. His messianic vision was not apocalyptic but historical and transformative, a reimagining of Judaism's mission as the foundation of a universal ethical future. In doing so, Salvador also critiqued institutional Christianity and Islam for their failures to realize this civilizational promise. Ultimately, his thought reflects a bold effort to recast Jewish identity as the spiritual and moral blueprint for a reconciled, progressive global order.

23 For a recent reading of Salvador see Guy G. STROUMSA, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism. The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth*, Oxford 2021, pp. 131–146.

The third direction explored in this volume sheds light on the role of scholarship not merely as a means to rediscover, understand, and reconstruct religious traditions, but as an active agent of religious transformation. This dynamic is particularly evident in the lives and works of the two protagonists of this section: the German Jewish intellectual Moritz Steinschneider and the Italian former Catholic priest Baldassarre Labanca. Despite their distinct backgrounds, both saw the scholarly study of Judaism and Christianity as an essential point of departure for any meaningful religious change. This section also offers an opportunity to assess the broader impact of religious scholarship – particularly on Christianity and Judaism – not only as a field of intellectual inquiry but as a formative tool in shaping new types of citizens or as a means to disclose truest forms of »religiosity«. It reflects a persistent fascination with »science« as a method, through which innovative approaches to reading and interpreting religious texts gave rise to new understandings of historical processes.

In her article, Irene Zwiep focuses on the life of the great German Jewish historian Moritz Steinschneider (1816–1907), a champion of the nascent *Wissenschaft des Judentums*²⁴. This is a particularly fascinating scholarly and intellectual trajectory because of the complex personality of Steinschneider who, according to Zwiep, was a staunch atheist who viewed religion – including Judaism – as a psychological construct driven by human frailty and yet he advocated for a form of deep ethical and moral piety. While Steinschneider rejected all revealed religion – including Judaism – as irrational and outdated, he promoted a form of secular Jewish piety rooted in ethics, cultural memory, and intellectual autonomy. Though criticized by later figures like Gershom Scholem who accused him of »liquidating Judaism« through critical historicism, Steinschneider's goal was not to destroy but to globalize and sustain Judaism by integrating it into the broader landscape of world civilization. His scholarship emphasized intercultural translation, bibliographical precision, and the cosmopolitan transmission of knowledge, particularly through the role of Jews as cultural mediators between Greek, Arabic, and European thought. The article argues that Steinschneider's notion of *Pietät* (piety) had little to do with religion in a traditional sense. Instead, it was an ethical commitment to Jewish *minhag* (custom), which he saw as a secular, cultural expression of the Good, deeply tied to family,

24 For recent perspectives on the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* see Mirjam THULIN/Markus KRAH (eds.), *Pardes – Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für Jüdische Studien – Cultures of Wissenschaft des Judentums* at 200 (2018), issue 24; Kerstin VON DER KRONE/Mirjam THULIN, *Wissenschaft in Context. A Research Essay on Wissenschaft des Judentums*, in: Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 58 (2013), pp. 249–280. The production of knowledge about religion is an interesting lens through which to analyse the development of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and more broadly, the intertwined discourse on religion and Christianity, with which it was often entangled. On this, see Kocku VON STUCKRAD, *The Scientification of Religion. An Historical Study of Discursive Changes, 1800–2000*, Berlin 2014.

community, and shared human values. Steinschneider's worldview was inspired by German Classicism, particularly Schiller's ideal of universal humanism, rather than Enlightenment rationalism alone. In conclusion, the author uses the concept of »invisible religion« (Luckmann) to describe Steinschneider's legacy: a secular Jew who created a moral, cultural identity that functioned like religion without invoking the divine.

It is very fruitful to read Steinschneider along with another scholar of religion, from a different national context. The chapter authored by Roberto Alciati explores the thought and work of Baldassarre Labanca (1829–1913), a former Catholic priest who became a pioneering professor of the History of Religions in post-unification Italy. Far from renouncing belief, Labanca undertook a profound redefinition of Catholicism, proposing a vision grounded not in dogma but in rationality, secularization, and a return to the essential teachings of Jesus, following into the paths of similar approaches in Germany and France²⁵. His was not a break from Christianity, but a reclamation of its core humanistic values – what he saw as a modern yet deeply rooted form of religiosity. Labanca stands out for his dual engagement with religion: as both a personal conviction and a subject of rigorous academic inquiry. His transition from the Theological Seminary life in Bourbon-controlled southern Italy to a university chair in the newly unified nation reflects not only his personal evolution but also the broader cultural and intellectual transformations of his time. He was the first to hold a professorship in the History of Religions in Italy, a milestone both for Italian academia and for Labanca's own project of religious reinterpretation. Rather than framing his life as a straightforward biography, this analysis adopts Pierre Bourdieu's concept of »trajectory«: a dynamic mapping of the evolving positions an individual occupies within shifting institutional and cultural fields. In this view, Labanca's decisions, beliefs, and scholarly output were not isolated acts but deeply embedded in the social and intellectual configurations of his time. His career was shaped as much by the evolving academic field as by his own ambitions or convictions. This approach emphasizes that what often appears to be a sequence of independent life choices is, in fact, a reflection of broader structural forces – networks of influence, opportunity, and constraint. Labanca's story, particularly the lesser-known episodes examined here, offers rich insight into how one might reconcile faith with critical inquiry, and how religious identity can be transformed – not abandoned – through scholarly reflection. In tracing Labanca's path, this study reveals a figure whose religious thought was never static, but constantly reimagined in dialogue with history, philosophy, and public life.

25 For a new insight into this topic see Cristiana FACCHINI/Annelies LANNOY (eds.), *The Many Lives of Jesus. Scholarship, Religion, and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, Turnhout 2024.

The fourth direction explores individual transformations in which religion amalgamates with patriotism and nationalism and is strongly impacted by them. The geo-political contexts are rather different in this case as well, taking into consideration both Italy and Poland, indicating at least a shared reference to Catholicism and the complex relationship with the national movements and formation of the nation-state of the respective countries.

In his contribution, Fulvio Conti explores the central role of anticlericalism in post-Unification Italy, as emphasized by leading Catholic historians such as Pietro Scoppola and Guido Verucci. Far from being a marginal force, anticlericalism is framed as a fundamental component of Italian political and cultural history, deeply intertwined with the broader process of secularization. Analyzing several Italian ex-Catholic priests, patriots, and intellectuals, Conti illustrates how during the *Risorgimento* conceptions of secularism intertwined with the patriotic movement and with the struggles for national independence. Furthermore, after Italy's unification (1861) anti-clericalism became a kind of legitimizing tool for the new state, while the Catholic religion was perceived by the presented intellectuals as an element of division. The Italian anticlerical tradition is shown to be complex and multifaceted. Alongside radical or satirical forms of anticlericalism, there existed more moderate or religiously motivated critiques. These included liberal Catholics such as Rosmini, Gioberti, and Manzoni, who called for a reformation of the Church based on its original spiritual mission, opposing temporal power while remaining within a framework of Christian belief.

Conti argues that anticlericalism was not just opposition to the Church but a political and cultural force tied to secularism, liberalism, and national unification. In this chapter, the author follows the many Catholics who left the priesthood for personal, political, or ideological reasons, including figures like Ugo Bassi, Giovanni Pantaleo, and Alessandro Gavazzi, who aligned with Garibaldi and Mazzini. Others, like Atto Vannucci, Gaetano Trezza, and Ausonio Franchi, contributed to secular thought and public life as philosophers and educators. Some, like Franchi, later returned to the Church, a move that sparked criticism. Conti shows how anticlericalism was diverse, ranging from rationalist atheism to liberal Catholic reformism, and played a central role in building Italy's secular state and shaping its modern national identity.

Marta Baranowska examines the views of the Polish politician Roman Dmowski (1864–1939) against the backdrop of a very different political setting, where Poles were still a repressed nation, belonging to two territorial empires. This chapter analyzes Dmowski's ideology of nationalism, particularly his concept of national ethics, and the evolving role of religion and the Catholic Church within that framework. A leading figure in Poland's nationalist movement, Dmowski viewed the nation as the highest moral good, an absolute value around which political and ethical life should be organized. At the turn of the twentieth century, Dmowski sought

to separate religion from the political sphere, proposing a »national ethics« that would guide civic behavior based on loyalty and duty to the nation, rather than Christian or Church-defined morality. In this system, morality was defined by what benefited the nation, and actions – including violence – could be justified if they served national interests. He introduced concepts such as national egoism, prioritizing the nation's good over universal ethics or religious values. Though Dmowski recognized the enduring cultural importance of Catholicism, especially for Polish identity under foreign rule, he sought to limit the Church's political influence. He believed that true national loyalty should surpass religious obedience and that nationalism should replace the Church as the moral guide in public life. Over time, however, his stance shifted: by the 1920s, amid changes in Polish politics and a religious revival, he began to advocate for cooperation between the Church and the nationalist state, promoting the idea of a »Catholic State of the Polish Nation«. Baranowska argues that Dmowski's so-called national ethics was not truly an ethical system, but a moralistic, totalitarian ideology designed to legitimize the authority of nationalist elites. His view of morality was rooted in collective instincts rather than individual freedom or conscience, effectively negating personal moral agency. Moreover, Dmowski's framing of nationalism as the only valid worldview left no room for pluralism, casting anything non-national as alien or hostile. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how Dmowski instrumentalized both religion and ethics to strengthen the nationalist project, redefining Catholicism to suit political needs and constructing a vision of national identity in which obedience to the nation replaced allegiance to universal or religious principles. His ideas reflect a broader European trend in which nationalism began to function as a »political religion«, rivaling or replacing traditional faiths in shaping public morality and identity.

The last and conclusive chapter of this volume brings us to the second half of the twentieth century, after two devastating world wars, genocide, and the rise and fall of political totalitarian regimes, and aims to cast a present and future glance at phenomena of religious transformation. In this chapter, Giuseppe Veltri addresses and challenges the assertion of the German sociologist of religion Jacob Taubes (1923–1987), according to whom technology has mastered the world. Veltri discusses Jacob Taubes's essay *Four Ages of Reason* (1957), which critiques the philosophical tradition dating back to Aristotle. The essay is rooted in his 1947 dissertation, *Abendländische Eschatologie*, and tackles the philosophical claim of universal reason while addressing the fragmentation of society into antagonistic groups. Taubes critiques the idea that philosophy's universal reason can reconcile social division and violence, calling the claim »chimerical« (false or illusory). The essay also delves into the relationship between reason, truth, and violence. Taubes is less concerned with reconciling controversial ideas or reaching consensus (as is often the focus in Jewish intellectual tradition) but more with understanding how reason as a tool for truth can be entangled with violence as a force for enforcing

a version of truth. Furthermore, Taubes addresses the paradox of technological progress promising rationality while simultaneously retreating from social rationality, questioning whether this progress has led society into barbarism, echoing the concerns of the Frankfurt School about the rise of barbarism despite the promise of reason's progress. Veltri discusses Taubes's accurate prediction that technology, especially in the form of sciences and artificial intelligence, would become the dominant force shaping culture and life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This volume has sought to illuminate the varied and often paradoxical trajectories of religious transformation in the nineteenth century, a period marked by profound political upheaval, cultural realignment, and intellectual innovation. By organizing the book around four thematic directions, we have followed individuals whose paths refracted and reshaped larger historical forces, figures whose religious lives were not simply reflective of their time, but actively engaged in remaking the religious landscape of modernity. The contributions gathered here dismantle binary oppositions such as belief versus secularism or tradition versus modernity. Instead, they underscore the extent to which religious change operated as a multidirectional process, often negotiated at the crossroads of personal experience, scholarly inquiry, political commitment, and cross-cultural exchange. From Swami Vivekananda's spiritual cosmopolitanism to Roman Dmowski's nationalist moralism, from the reimagined Mosaism of Joseph Salvador to the scholarly radicalism of Moritz Stein-schneider, these case studies demonstrate the astonishing variety of forms that religious transformation could take – individual and collective, reformist and radical, secular and spiritual. Crucially, the volume highlights the global and entangled dimensions of religious thought in this period. The circulation of ideas across continents, the reworking of traditions in dialogue with others, and the hybridization of spiritual vocabularies challenge the Eurocentric narrative of secularization as a unilinear, western process. Whether in the universalist visions of the Saint-Simoni-ans, the ethical theism of Luzzatti, or the cross-cultural feminization of religion in Harris's portrait of Vivekananda's circles, what emerges is a transnational and pluralistic map of modern religiosity. Finally, many of the individuals considered here operated at the margins – of institutions, disciplines, or confessions – but in doing so, they expanded the possibilities of religious thought and experience. Their lives testify to the malleability of faith, the political uses of religion, and the enduring human search for meaning in times of transformation. By following their trajectories, this volume has not only explored the religious past but also raised questions that remain relevant today: about the place of belief in public life, the ethics of pluralism, and the creative tensions between identity and universalism. In bringing these diverse voices together, we offer not a unified theory, but a constellation of pathways – each revealing how religion was imagined, contested, and lived in an age that was highly creative and challenged by the modern.