1 Comparative Religion and/as Modernist Theology: *L’Évangile et l’Église* and the Neuilly Essais

The publication of *L’Évangile et l’Église* in 1902 was a milestone in Loisy’s trajectory, as well as a landmark in the intellectual history of the Church. Often considered as the starting point of the Modernist crisis in the Catholic Church, the book was the main cause of the intensification of its anti-Modernist politics, culminating in the Syllabus *Lamentabili sane exitu* and the Encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* in 1907, followed by the so-called anti-Modernist oath in 1910.¹ The volume was the first of the *petits livres rouges*, Loisy’s series of historical and philosophical essays.² In it, he offered a historical-critical account of primitive Christianity and analyzed the relation of Jesus’ original gospel to the later development of the Church, and of Christian doctrine and cult. Loisy decided the time had come to abandon the protection of the pseudonyms he would normally use to publish on delicate topics.³ In *L’Évangile et l’Église* he openly insisted on the necessary historicization of early Christianity and consistently applied his now fully developed evolutionary philosophy of history. His rewriting of the Christian origins conveyed a radical reform program for early 20th century Catholicism. It was a plea for a systematic redefinition of the asymmetrical relationship between science and faith in the Church, and, ultimately, for a new understanding of Catholic faith itself. Loisy’s book was condemned locally by Cardinal Richard in early 1903, but it wasn’t until late 1903, after Pius X had come to power, that the volume was placed on the Index of forbidden books.⁴ In 1903, Loisy published several other “dangerous” volumes, such as *Autour d’un petit livre* (1903), his second *petit livre rouge*, in which he tried to defend


² After *EE*, Loisy published another 14 *petits livres rouges* (the last one, *La Crise morale du temps présent et l'éducation humaine*, was published in 1937, three years before his death). For all references, see the bibliography by Émile Poulat in Houtin and Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy*, 305ff.


⁴ In his * Mémoires* II, 169, Loisy explained that at first “the zealots of orthodoxy” were hesitant about their position toward the book.
and clarify the positions of the first volume for his critics. Still, there is no doubt that his excommunication was most significantly accelerated by the publication of *L’Évangile et l’Église*.

Loisy’s seminal book almost instantly attracted attention from specialized and non-specialized audiences inside and outside of the Church. Until today, it has remained his best-known work. The first edition numbered 1500 copies, which were sold out in no time. The book was later translated into various languages (English, German, Spanish and Italian) and would receive a total of five editions (1903, 1904, 1908, 1929). Since the rise of scientific interest in this significant period of Catholic Church history, Loisy’s book has been the subject of extensive and detailed scholarship. The dominant focus has been on his notable reinterpretation of the relationship between history and theology, and its implications for the power and the status of the Church, and for the meaning of Catholic dogma. But the book has also received ample attention from biblical scholars and historians of Christianity, who have shown how Loisy propagated the new exegetical methods which were being developed in Liberal-Protestant Germany and in secular French scholarship (especially Renan), among his French Catholic peers.

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5 We should also mention the publication of Loisy’s commentary *Le Quatrième Évangile* (Paris: Picard, 1903), which strongly denied the historical character of the fourth gospel, and was put on the Index at the same time as *EE* and *Autour d’un petit livre*. On this topic, see Claus Arnold and Giacomo Losito, eds., *La Censure d’Alfred Loisy* (1903). *Les documents des Congrégations de l’Index et du Saint Office* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009).


7 Modern scholarship of Roman Catholic Modernism was instigated by Émile Poulat’s highly influential *Histoire, dogme et critique* (1962). See our introduction, for a selected bibliography on Loisy’s role in Catholic Modernism.


Despite these multifarious approaches, there is an aspect of the book which has not yet received the attention it deserves, that is, the vital role of comparative religion in Loisy’s historical argumentation. While several scholars have studied his innovative views on Jesus’ interrelation to Judaism, his original approach to early Christianity’s dependence on Greco-Roman paganism has gone virtually unnoticed, and the same is true for his (careful) consideration of a universalizing anthropological approach to religion. The book’s statements on early Christianity’s relationship to surrounding Jewish and pagan religious cultures invite further investigation of a hitherto largely neglected context of interpretation: the secular discipline of history of religions.¹⁰ In our introduction it has been pointed out that Loisy steadily attempted to bridge the gap between the then strictly separated Catholic and secular scientific worlds. The present chapter will show how Loisy’s essay carefully unveiled his position toward methods used in the French and international history of religions, where the comparability of Christianity had been one of the most debated issues since the late 19th century. New insights into this Modernist manifesto may be gained when we consider the possibility that his theory of religious evolution—which was highly indebted to the theological views of Cardinal John Henry Newman¹¹—was further consolidated when Loisy entered into a dialogue with the evolutionary models of history writing which were at use at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the Collège de France.

The principal objectives of this chapter, then, are to reveal the function of comparative religion within Loisy’s evolutionary historiography, and to position his comparative views within the two ideological-scientific contexts that constituted his intellectual horizon. First, Loisy’s thought was diametrically opposed to traditional Catholic scholarship, but it is important to remember that L’Évangile et l’Église was aimed at defending the Church, though of course in the future involved its reception by the ecclesiastical authorities: Francesco Turvasi, The Condemnation of Alfred Loisy and the Historical Method (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1979), 61–82; C.J.T. Talar, (Re)reading, Reception, and Rhetoric, 8–34; Arnold and Losito, La Censure d’Alfred Loisy; Arnold and Losito, Lamentabili sane exitu; Claus Arnold, “Lamentabili Sane Exitu” (1907). Das Römische Lehramt und die Exegese Alfred Loisys,” Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte 11 (2004): 24–51.

¹⁰ The context of the French science laïque is summarized in Talar, “Innovation and biblical interpretation,” 206–208 and more elaborately discussed in Hill, The Politics of Modernism, 45–49. Talar and Hill both focus on the exegetical methods at use in the independent sector; comparative methodology lies beyond their scope.

¹¹ For Loisy’s evolutionary philosophy of religion, see infra, 1.4.
modernized form he envisioned.¹² The book was presented as a refutation of the famous essay *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900) by the German Liberal-Protestant scholar Adolf von Harnack.¹³ Harnack’s peculiar comparative views nourished Loisy’s, even if they mostly served as a negative point of reference. Secondly, we want to demonstrate Loisy’s indebtedness to some of the comparative paradigms in use in the nascent academic discipline of history of religions.¹⁴ By this context we do not only mean the French institutionalized discipline, which was heavily dominated by Liberal-Protestant scholars like father and son Albert and Jean Réville, or Auguste Sabatier.¹⁵ We will also focus on Loisy’s relation to independent scholars like Reinach and Cumont who did not occupy chairs in history of religions, but still dominated the French and international comparative debates in the early 20th century.¹⁶ This chapter’s exploratory journey into Loisy’s Modernist views, Harnack’s Liberal-Protestant ideas, and the popular comparative frameworks of the *science laïque* will ultimately enable us to address the overarching question of the scientificity of Loisy’s comparative religion at the turn of the century. Even if Loisy firmly qualified himself as a “historian,” his critical scholarship was inextricably intertwined with a deep religious commitment.¹⁷ To what extent was his historical argumentation, indeed, “scientific,” when one compares it to the work of his contemporaries?

*L’Évangile et l’Église* is a prime example of a highly premeditated and strategic self-representation. When writing this work, Loisy was working in an environment that was particularly hostile to any method that could question the uniqueness of Christianity and the historical truthfulness of the Bible. For a correct interpretation of his book, it is necessary that we first examine how this anti-scientific setting affected the publication. The second section of this chapter deals with Harnack’s ideas on the comparative history of Christianity. Thereafter follows the analysis of *L’Évangile et l’Église*, complemented by the study of two

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¹² Loisy, *Choses passées*, 233, where EE is characterized as “une sorte de programme de catholicisme progressiste.”


¹⁴ We will come back to the history of the institutionalization of history of religions, and the role played by Liberal-Protestant scholars, in the following chapter on Loisy’s appointment at the *Collège de France*.

¹⁵ The comparative views of the Liberal Protestants at the *EPHE* will turn out to be at wide variance both with each other and with those of German Liberal Protestants like Harnack.

¹⁶ See *infra*, 1.4 for more information on these two important scholars.

¹⁷ For the intricate ways in which the academic study of religion itself created new religious truth claims, see the fine analysis of Kocku von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion*. 
slightly earlier texts of Loisy’s—his Neuilly Essais and pseudonymous A. Firmin article “La religion d’Israël.” The final part of this chapter is devoted to Loisy’s correspondence with several leading personalities of the Sciences religieuses department at the École pratique, and aims at determining how Loisy’s Évangile et l’Église and its subsequent condemnation affected his position at this prominent institution.

### 1.1 On the Interpretation of L’Évangile et l’Église

Regardless of one’s particular focus of research, L’Évangile et l’Église is a highly difficult work for any scholar to interpret due to the conflicting voices it conveys. Its ambivalent character reflects Loisy’s complex psychology at this point of his Catholic career. On the one hand, his dismissal from the Institut catholique made him painfully aware that his scientific and religious views radically conflicted with the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church. In a letter to his friend Friedrich von Hügel, Loisy explained that he was unsure whether he would actually have the courage to publish the book. He rightly anticipated that the publication would set off what may be called without any exaggeration a tsunami of troubles with ecclesiastical authorities. On the other hand, Loisy still hoped that the Church—or at the least a good part of his fellow Catholics—would come on board, and comprehend the inherent value of his modernizing ideas. This constant wavering between realism and hope led Loisy to wrap his views in

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18 See our introduction to this book for more information about this massive manuscript, which was first published in 2010.
19 The difficulties to interpret EE have been discussed abundantly: Poulat, Histoire, dogme et critique, 89–90; Talar, (Re)reading, Reception, and Rhetoric, 9–18; Geyer, Wahrheit und Absolutheit des Christentums, 9–15.
20 See supra (introduction) for Loisy’s first confrontations with Roman intransigence. His autobiographical writings testify to this state of mind, see for instance the extract from his diary (October 13, 1902) in his Choses passées, 242.
21 British-based scholar Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852–1925; Austrian father, Scottish mother) was an influential figure in Roman Catholic Modernism. A deeply religious scholar, he was especially interested in philosophy of religion and the study of mysticism. Von Hügel was the nerve center, so to speak, of an extensive network of liberal religious scholars, including, for instance, Maude Petre (see infra, chapter 5, 5.2.2) and George Tyrrell. On von Hügel, see (among many others): Lawrence F. Barmann, Baron Friedrich von Hügel and the Modernist Crisis in England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
22 Letter of August 10, 1902, quoted in Loisy, Mémoires, II, 124.
23 Loisy, Mémoires, II, 134.
an apologetic anti-Protestant packing, which is alternatingly purely strategic and completely sincere.²⁴

In his introduction, Loisy explained that his volume offered a study of Harnack’s *Wesen des Christentums*.²⁵ In the following part of our chapter, Harnack’s ideas will be discussed in great detail. For now it suffices to note that this Protestant scholar claimed to have written a purely historical enquiry into the essence of Christianity, while, in reality, he combined advanced historical criticism with a Liberal-Protestant reading of Jesus’ life and message. Harnack’s evident conclusion was that the Catholic Church had no foundation in this original message. When the French translation of Harnack’s essay came out, Loisy could no longer resist the urge of writing a reaction. He explained that his sole aim was to “catch the point of view of history.”²⁶ It is worth underlining that Loisy and Harnack both believed that in their controversy over Jesus’ original gospel it was *history* which was at stake, and not religion. Loisy emphatically disavowed having written “an apologia for Catholicism or traditional dogma.”²⁷

But although Loisy stated differently, his *Évangile et l’Église* most definitely served apologetic goals.²⁸ In truth, it did not defend traditional Catholicism, but a thoroughly modernized Church. The book’s anti-Harnackian point of departure was sincere in the sense that Loisy was absolutely convinced of Harnack’s theological abuse of history, but it was an unequivocally strategic choice, too. In reality, Loisy’s ideas showed much closer resemblance to Harnack’s than to those of his conservative Catholic colleagues.²⁹ With the contention that he had not intended to offer “an apologia for Catholicism,” he anticipated the criticism of those who would see through the strategy and figure out that Loisy’s anti-Protestantism was indeed neither a synonym nor a guarantee for traditional Cathol-

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²⁴ Loisy later admitted that he had “discretely” integrated his own reform program in his refutation of Harnack, but denied that this was a strategic decision: *Mémoires*, II, 168.


²⁸ The same is true for Harnack’s “historical” essay, see *infra* (1.2).

²⁹ In his *Mémoires* II, 270, Loisy admitted this.
icism. Harvey Hill has recently adduced conclusive proof of the fact that Harnack’s Wesen offered an excellent apologetic pretext for Loisy to publish historical views he had actually developed well before 1900 in his Neuilly Essais. This, however, does not imply that Harnack’s ideas are not crucial to understand Loisy’s. The key ideas of Harnack’s Wesen were perfectly analogous to those of his famous Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte (1886–1890), which was explicitly mentioned in the Essais together with other recent (German and French) Liberal-Protestant publications.

For Loisy’s views on comparative religion—which are outside of the scope of Hill’s enquiry—the added value of the Neuilly document is somewhat limited, in the sense that the ideas exposed in this document are not substantially different from those published in his pseudonymous work. We will see (1.4) that the first section of the chapter “La religion d’Israël” of the Neuilly manuscript sheds very interesting new light on the comparative framework behind L’Évangile et l’Église, but it should immediately be added that Loisy published an almost unaltered version of this text in his article “La religion d’Israël” (1900). This pseudonymous article had been condemned by Cardinal Richard shortly after its publication in 1900, so at the time of writing L’Évangile et l’Église, Loisy knew from experience what sort of historical arguments were better omitted in a book which he intended as an invitation for Catholics to pause for thought, but not as shock therapy. The comparison between the Firmin article and L’Évangile et l’Église will allow us to uncover the strategies at work in the latter work, which in the end—in spite of Loisy’s precautions—was nothing short of a bombshell in the Catholic world.

30 Hill, “Loisy’s L’Évangile et l’Église.” See also Rosanna Ciappa, “La réforme du régime intellectuel de l’Église catholique,” in Alfred Loisy. La Crise de la foi dans le temps présent, ed. François Laplanche (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 574–585. This is indirectly confirmed by Loisy himself, Mémoires, II, 125.
33 For the history of this “Firmin” paper, see Talar, Prelude to the Modernist Crisis, vii, xii-xv; Jeffrey L. Morrow, “Alfred Loisy’s Developmental Approach to Scripture: Reading the ‘Firmin’ Articles in the Context of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Historical Biblical Criticism,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 15 (2013), 325. For more information about the relation between Loisy’s pseudonymous publications and the Neuilly Essais, see infra, 1.4.
34 Loisy, Mémoires, II, 134.
Another factor that is vital for the correct interpretation of Loisy’s book, is his failed ambition to join in with the secular academic study of religion in France.³⁵ After the condemnation of his Firmin article Loisy tried to strengthen ties with the science laïque. With help of his influential friend, the French philosopher and later founder of the Décades de Pontigny, Paul Desjardins (1859–1940),³⁶ he managed to obtain a position as conférencier libre at the 5ième Section of the École pratique in 1900.³⁷ Thus integrated in the department that was the intellectual showpiece of the anticlerical politics of the Third Republic, Loisy’s courses were to meet the strictly non-confessional standards that were the scientific tenets of the institution. At the turn of the century, the scientific spirit of the Fifth Section was characterized by a critical historical and comparative approach to religion.³⁸ By entering the École, Loisy found himself in a troubling situation. On the one hand, he was surrounded by the “highly advanced ideas”³⁹ of renowned and pioneering scholars like Albert Réville, Maurice Vernes, Jules Toutain, and starting from 1901 also Marcel Mauss (the latter three were to be his rivals for the Collège de France in 1909).⁴⁰ On the other hand, he was still member of a profoundly anti-scientific Catholic Church, which was anything but

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³⁵ On Loisy’s time at the EPHE, see the first chapter of his Mémoires, II, 5 – 33. The history of the institutionalization of history of religions in France will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

³⁶ Anne Heurgon-Desjardins, ed., Paul Desjardins et les décades de Pontigny. Études, témoignages, et documents inédits (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964); Émile Poulat, Modernistica. Horizons, Physionomies, Débats (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1982) and François Chaubet, Paul Desjardins et les décades de Pontigny (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2002). The “Décades de Pontigny” were ten-day meetings, organized by Desjardins in the former Cistercian Pontigny Abbey. Founded in 1910, they were attended by European intellectuals who discussed themes related to literature, philosophy, ethics, and politics. The meetings took place between 1910 – 1913 and 1922 – 1939.


³⁹ Loisy, Choses passées, 222.

⁴⁰ On the exact composition of the Fifth Section in 1900: John I. Brodes III, “The Durkheimians and the Fifth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études: An Overview,” in Reappraising Durkheim for the study and teaching of religion today, eds. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 89 – 90. For more details on Vernes, Mauss, and Toutain, see chapter 2 (2.2.1).
happy about this new connection with the secular scientific world. In the following chapter we will discuss the institutional context of the academic study of religion in more detail, but in order to understand the truly symbolic meaning of Loisy’s position in 1900, it is useful to mention now that the Fifth Section in *Sciences religieuses* was established in 1886, just one year after the State Faculties in Catholic Theology had been abolished. In 1900 Loisy started to work at an institution which was explicitly represented by the Third Republic as the scientific replacement for the Catholic theological approach to religion. By joining in with the secular forces, Loisy basically confirmed the inadequacy of the latter tradition and the superiority of the former.

At the *École*, Loisy first taught a comparative course on *Les Mythes babyloniens et les premiers chapitres de la Genèse*. With this topic, he took a clear-cut stand against the ecclesiastical hierarchy which had earlier condemned his historical-critical Firmin article on “La religion d’Israël.”⁴¹ In his *Mémoires*, Loisy explained that at first Cardinal Richard had not dared to intervene, because he had been afraid of political repercussions. In the aftermath of the polemical institutionalization of the *5ième Section* and in the build-up to the separation of Church and State in 1905, a Catholic blowing the whistle at an employee of the State funded *École* could certainly produce political tension. And thus Loisy continued his course, although the students of the *Institut catholique* in Paris were advised by their superiors not to attend it.⁴² Loisy’s integration into the *École pratique* significantly enlarged his scientific autonomy, and positively affected his desire to further perfect the implementation of a purely historical methodology. From a letter to his friend von Hügel, it is very clear that Loisy intended to build a future at the Sorbonne for himself. To this end, he thought it necessary to move beyond the study of Judaism and the Old Testament, and to finally begin publishing his far more dangerous historical-critical studies on the New Testament, such as his commentary on the gospel of John (published in 1903). With the prospect of a permanent position at the *École pratique*, Loisy was now willing to take the risk of an ecclesiastical condemnation, even if he admitted that he would be seriously distressed should this actually occur: “J’achèverai mon saint Jean et je ne le garderai pas indéfiniment dans mes cartons. Pour mon avenir à la Sorbonne, il faut que je publie des travaux scientifiques. Si le Saint-Office et l’Index en éprouvent quelque peine, j’en serai moi-même fort affligé ; mais je serai obligé de passer outre.”⁴³

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Shortly after writing this letter, Loisy’s hopes for such a future were shattered. In 1901 he applied for the chair of ancient Christian literature at the Fifth Section, left vacant by the Liberal-Protestant scholar Auguste Sabatier (infra, 1.4.). The larger part of the selection committee voted against a candidate whom they believed to be able to jeopardize the confessional neutrality of the institution. Loisy’s colleagues at the École believed that his scientific-comparative approach to Judaism provided no guarantees for a similar treatment of Christianity. A bitter pill for Loisy to swallow, as he now personally experienced the ill effects of the highly polarized study of religion in France. His deep disappointment over “the narrowmindedness of the science laïque” seems to have had a double effect on L’Évangile et l’Église. On the one hand, it increased the emphasis he laid on a purely “historical” argumentation. Hardly one year had passed since his setback at the École, when Loisy published his first undisguised historical narrative on early Christianity. It is very reasonable to assume that his emphatic use of “the historical method” should not just be understood as a reply to Harnack’s proclaimed purely historical account, but also as an attempt to demonstrate his scientific credibility to the secular circles which had rejected him. We may even assert that, once again, Harnack was a kind of victim of Loisy’s personal agenda, for we will see that he misrepresented Harnack’s limited but existing comparative approaches, quite likely with the intention of highlighting the scientific character of his own position. On the other hand, and rather paradoxically, there is Hill’s correct observation that Loisy’s disappointment seemed to have driven him back into the arms of the Catholic Church. At about the time he was writing L’Évangile et l’Église, Loisy learned that he was in the running for the bishopric of Monaco, which in the end also didn’t happen. The fact that he most probably wanted that appointment, may indeed explain why he adopted a well-articulated apologetic discourse in his book, all the while sticking to the conviction that consistent historical criticism was the future of the Catholic science of religion.

44 Note that in 1888 Loisy had applied for the chair of Assyriology at the Fourth Section, but he had not obtained the position. The affair led to a rift with his former mentor Louis Duchesne, who held a position at the Section and had done little to support Loisy’s candidacy, see supra, introduction.
45 In 1902 Loisy proposed to dedicate his course to “Le ministère du Christ dans les Synoptiques.” According to Loisy (Mémoires, II, 122), there was quite some resistance among the members of the École against this topic. Only after Jean Réville ensured them that Loisy was a “radical even in exegesis of the gospels,” the topic was approved.
46 Loisy, Mémoires, II, 32.
1.2 Comparative Religion in Adolf von Harnack’s *Das Wesen des Christentums*

*Das Wesen des Christentums* compiles a series of lectures Harnack gave to a large audience of about 600 students at the University of Berlin in the winter semester of 1899 – 1900. It is safe to say that the essay caused as big a stir in the Protestant world as Loisy’s *Évangile et l’Église* did among Catholics, and it has since received just as much scholarly attention. The style and aim of *Das Wesen des Christentums* were purposefully modest. Harnack “simply” wanted to offer “a plain statement of the gospel and its history” which would focus the attention of Christians and non-Christians on the permanent moral and spiritual value of Christianity. Harnack’s emphasis on the simplicity of Jesus’ message was a reaction against the 19th century *Leben Jesu Forschung* which had produced a vast array of widely divergent analyses of the gospel and the life of the historical Jesus. Historical criticism had progressively annihilated the historical believability of the gospels. Harnack anticipated Albert Schweitzer’s observation that the frantic attempts at reconstructing a new “historically truthful” image of Jesus revealed the personal beliefs of the scholars in question, rather than those of Jesus himself. Theological and ideological presuppositions were overclouding Jesus’ message. It was time, Harnack argued, for a historical back to basics.

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49 Albert Schweitzer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede. Eine Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1906). We quote from the following English translation: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus. A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 2010), 398 – 399: “He [the historical Jesus, my remark] will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religion of the present can ascribe, according to its long-cherished custom, its own thoughts and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making.”

Just like Loisy, Harnack was in essence trying to reconcile the results of his historical scholarship with his Christian faith by propagating a new interpretation of Christian religion. The historical-critical study of the Bible placed the Christian scholar before a major dilemma: “There are only two possibilities here: either the Gospel is in all respects identical with its earliest form, in which case it came with its time and has departed with it; or else it contains something which, under differing historical forms, is of permanent validity. The latter is the true view.”\(^\text{51}\) According to Harnack, Christianity had a core which remained unchanged throughout history, and which, correspondingly, could never be deconstructed by historical criticism.\(^\text{52}\) To distinguish this presupposed ahistorical essence from the timely and particularistic religious circumstances in which it is always embedded, he used the terms “kernel” (Kern) and “husk” (Schale).\(^\text{53}\) Harnack asserted that every Christian has an innate sense of what the essence is, but it is historical science that leads to the most precise definition of the “kernel,” by removing it from the constantly changing “husk.” Harnack’s dichotomist conception inherently offered an irresolvable problem for his “purely historical” enquiry. There is a diametrical opposition between his belief in such a thing as a “timeless essence,”\(^\text{54}\) and his claim to determine this “internal flame” historically.

Distinguishing “kernel” from “husk,” Harnack admitted, was indeed not an easy task. There were two steps for the historian to follow in order to determine the permanent value of Christianity. The first and most important task is to uncover the essence of Jesus’ gospel by a critical analysis of the gospels, which Harnack tried to do in the first part of his book. Thereafter, he concentrated on the subsequent history of Christianity: first on the apostolic age: “because every great and powerful personality reveals a part of what it is only when seen in those whom it influences”\(^\text{55}\) secondly on all “later products of its spirit” (in Harnack’s essay this is second century Christianity, Roman Catholicism, the Orthodox Church, and Protestantism). In short, we can say that Harnack considered

\(^{51}\) Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 14.


\(^{54}\) On the “timeless” nature of the essence: Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 160.

\(^{55}\) Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 10.
the history of Christianity before the Reformation as a progressive evolution toward a religion that focused on an external (i.e. doctrinal and ritual) “husk,” which often was of pagan origin. In other words, he observed a growing corruption of the fully inward (moral and spiritual) and pure “kernel” which had been the focus of Jesus himself. Unsurprisingly, he qualified the Reformation as the “greatest movement” in Christian history because it checked this corruption by its “critical reduction to principles,” but he did underline that Protestantism, too, needed further reform (read: further individualization) in order to come closer to the essence. This conviction—together with Harnack’s highly critical assessment of the gospels (for instance, his skepticism on miracles)—explains why the German scholar’s work was far from unanimously accepted in the Protestant world.

Equally important for understanding L’Évangile et l’Église is Harnack’s position on the new discipline of history of religions which was taking root in several European countries at that time. In 1901 Harnack delivered his famous “Rektoratsrede” in which he took a decisive stand against the introduction of Religionswissenschaft and Religionsgeschichte in the theological faculty of the University of Berlin. His speech heavily insisted on the uniqueness of Christianity and forcefully rejected the universalizing taxonomies of fellow Liberal-Protestant scholars, like the Dutch scholar Cornelis Petrus Tiele and, closer to home for Loisy, the Révilles at the École pratique in Paris, who subjected the development of Christianity to laws of evolution they deemed applicable to all religions, regardless of chronology and geography. Instead, Harnack centered Christianity

56 Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 287.
60 For an introduction on Tiele’s typology of religion see Hans G. Kippenberg, “One of the Mightiest Motors in the History of Mankind. C.P. Tiele’s Impact on German Religionswissenschaft,”
as the sole object of religious studies: “Wer die Religion nicht kennt, kennt keine, und wer sie samt ihrer Geschichte kennt, kennt alle.”⁶¹ This statement did not imply that Harnack rejected comparative religion altogether. In part, the underlying idea was that in the course of its long history—which he traced all the way back to primitive Judaism—“die Religion” (first in its Judaic and later in its historical Christian form) had constantly interacted with other non-Judeo-Christian religions. According to Harnack, comparativism is scientifically valid when it focuses on the concrete historical interactions of Christianity with other religions, though it is interesting to note that the examples he gave of these influences and interactions only involved pre-Christian Judaism and the Catholic Christian tradition.⁶² But in spite of the fact that Harnack allowed for some degree of comparison between the Christian tradition and other religions, the first intention of his statement was to corroborate the absolute superiority of the Christian religion, which was not one religion among many other, but the religion to be studied in the faculties of theology:

Wir wünschen, daß die theologischen Fakultäten für die Erforschung der christlichen Religion bleiben, weil das Christentum in seiner reinen Gestalt nicht eine Religion neben anderen ist, sondern die Religion. Es ist aber die Religion, weil Jesu Christus nicht ein Meister neben anderen ist, sondern der Meister, und weil sein Evangelium der eingeborenen, in der Geschichte enthüllten Anlage der Menschheit entspricht.⁶³

Contrary to Loisy who adopted a positive attitude toward the research of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,⁶⁴ Harnack was quite negative about the work of these fellow Protestant scholars who had embraced comparative religion and applied it to the earliest stages of Christianity. Suzanne Marchand’s studies of Orientalism in 19th century Germany have shown that the opposition between Harnack and the Schule was also due to the fact that philhellenic Harnack was very skeptical about the Schule’s interest in Hellenized Oriental religions.⁶⁵ The reti-
censure felt by Harnack toward history of religions was widely shared by German Protestant theologians. This and Harnack’s key position in German politics of science accounts for Germany’s relatively late institutionalization of the discipline, and it is of paramount importance to understand *Das Wesen des Christentum.*

According to Harnack, the permanent value of Jesus’ gospel consisted in: “Firstly, the kingdom of God and its coming. Secondly, God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul. Thirdly, the higher righteousness and the commandment of love.” Each of these points is interpreted in light of Jesus’ alleged emphasis on the individual and direct relation of each Christian to God the Father: they are basically “variations on a single theme.” Congruent with his distinction between ahistorical kernel and historical husk, Harnack’s views on the comparability of Jesus’ gospel are double. When the essence is concerned, his approach is mostly non-comparative. Jesus’ genius had succeeded in condensing religion into something universally human by centering individual spirituality and moral responsibility. This timeless message appeals to the inner life of man, who also remains more or less the same throughout history.

No doubt it is true that the view of the world and history with which the Gospel is connected is quite different from ours, and that view we cannot recall to life, and would not if we could; but “indissoluble” the connection is not. I have tried to show what the essential elements in the Gospel are, and these elements are “timeless.” Not only are they so; but the man to whom the Gospel addresses itself is also “timeless,” that is to say, he is the man who, in spite of all progress and development, never changes in his inmost constitution and in his fundamental relations with the external world.

Interestingly, Harnack’s belief in the fundamental uniformity of man’s “inmost constitution” did not induce him to compare the Christian essence with other, non-Christian religions which also appeal to the religious individual. The uni-


67 Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 55.


69 Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 160.
formity does not seem to be universal, but remains strictly limited to the constitution of the Christian believer. The Christian essence itself is the unique result of a personal innovation of Jesus, based on what Harnack vaguely qualified as Jesus’ “deeper knowledge.”⁷⁰ This religious knowledge is radically disconnected from Jesus’ Judaic background.

But Harnack was of course too solid a historian to discard the fact that, like any other historical human being, Jesus’ ideas and actions had been subject to a historical-religious context. He admitted that even the tripartite essence of Jesus’ gospel showed at least a few similarities to surrounding ancient religions.⁷¹ When discussing these similarities, Harnack deployed an evolutionary framework that was very popular among 19th and early 20th century historians.⁷² He pointed out that individualizing and soteriological trends had already existed in pre-Christian Judaism and Hellenism.⁷³ And the same is true for the Christian concept of righteousness, which had been independently developed by Greek thinkers and Palestine prophets.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Alexander the Great had initiated a tendency toward religious universality to which Judaism, too, had succumbed.⁷⁵ Like that of many contemporary historians of religions, Harnack’s comparative narrative was deeply teleological: similar tendencies in pre-Christian Judaism and Hellenism were of major importance because they prepared the non-Christian mind for the prompt acceptance of Jesus’ gospel.⁷⁶

How, then, did Harnack explain the similarities between the different constituents of the religious evolution he observed in Antiquity? We have seen that he took a dim view of the anthropological frameworks which were increasingly popular in the discipline of history of religions, and explained similarities as the result of universal laws. In this sense, Harnack’s ideas were different from

⁷⁰ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 60.
⁷¹ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 50–53, especially 51: “The spring of holiness had, indeed, long been opened.”
⁷³ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 143.
⁷⁴ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 82.
⁷⁶ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 215. See also 187, on Judaism of the Diaspora as a “preliminary stage in the history of Christianity.”
those of the French Liberal Protestants at the École pratique, who adopted a more open (but still careful) attitude toward anthropological methodology.\textsuperscript{77} The scarce instances where Harnack offered an explanation of Jesus’ similarities to the religious cultures of his time, mostly reveal a historicist, genealogical interpretation on the basis of historical contact between religions. Overall, though, he struggled to reconcile historical criticism with his conviction that Jesus’ gospel was something else, something irreducible to history. At various points one gets the impression that for Harnack, the gospel of Jesus and even the religion of his first followers, really did fully coalesce with the ahistorical essence.

The major ambiguity in Harnack’s comparative approach concerns Jesus’ inter-relation with Judaism. On the possibility of pagan influences on Jesus’ gospel and, by extension, on that of the first communities, he was abundantly clear: Hellenism did not play any role. Harnack distinguished between three phases of pagan influence, aside from the aforementioned stage of “preparation.” The first phase is the infiltration of Greek philosophical thought which started in the second century. The second phase began in the third century: “Greek mysteries, and Greek civilization in the whole range of its development, exercise their influence on the Church, but not mythology and polytheism; these were still to come.”\textsuperscript{78} In the fourth century, finally, “Hellenism as a whole” integrated in the Catholic Church. This compartmentalization allowed Harnack to isolate the much appreciated “treasure” of Greek philosophy (with its “monotheistic piety”), while Catholicism absorbed the clearly inferior features of pagan worship. The three-phased scheme reflects a scale of values, which logically placed the “Greek mysteries” with their higher individualism before the ultimate evil of “mythology and polytheism” of “traditional” paganism.\textsuperscript{79} Needless to say that Harnack’s proto-typically Protestant myth of the immaculate first century Christianity was a thorn in Loisy’s side.\textsuperscript{80} Harnack’s ideas on Judaism are far more subtle and more difficult to gauge. The question of early Christianity’s interrelation to Judaism remained a particularly hot topic at the turn of the century, when several German scholars—headed by Johannes Weiß and Albert Schweitzer—were rediscovering the eschatological character of the kingdom of God notion.

\textsuperscript{77} See infra, 1A.
\textsuperscript{78} Harnack, \textit{What is Christianity?}, 216.
\textsuperscript{79} The then much-discussed pagan “oriental” religions are conspicuous by their absence in Harnack’s \textit{Wesen}.
\textsuperscript{80} On the historiography of this perpetual discussion between Catholic and Protestant scholars, Jonathan Z. Smith, \textit{Drudgery Divine} (note, though, that Smith’s focus is on Anglo-Saxon scholarship, therefore Harnack, Loisy and other protagonists of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century debates are only very summarily dealt with). We will come back to these debates in this chapter and in chapter 4.
in the gospels and drawing attention to its link to apocalyptic Judaism. Harnack did not follow the advanced comparative ideas of Weiß, whose influential book *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (1892) was generally very negatively received by Liberal-Protestant scholars. Overall, Harnack’s picture of Jesus is distinctly anti-Judaic. Jesus’ major achievement was to have freed religion from the “earthly” burden of “external forms of religious worship and technical observance,” which were self-sufficient in Judaism and drew attention away from deeper morality and spirituality. For Harnack’s Jesus, religion is the personal belief in God the Father and its moral consequences. In line with this conception of religion, Harnack did not consider Jesus as the instigator of a movement within Judaism, but as the founder of a completely new religion, even if he hadn’t instituted Christian cult or doctrine, or socially organized the first Chris-

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82 Benedict T. Viviano, “Eschatology and the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 79: “The effect of the book was like that of a brick hurled at a plate-glass window. The book was so offensive because liberal theology had a bad conscience about its suppression of Jesus’ eschatology. It was not ignorant of it. It simply hoped to keep it a dirty little secret. Thanks to Weiss, the liberal emperor was seen to have no clothes.”


84 Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 77.

85 Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 73: “By being bound up with religious worship and petrified in ritual observance, the morality of holiness had, indeed, been transformed into something that was the clean opposite of it.”
tian community. Rituals are virtually absent from Harnack’s account of Jesus and of the first disciples. ⁸⁶ As for Christian doctrines, Harnack firmly rejected any form of dogma in Jesus’ teachings. ⁸⁷ The gospel is not knowledge, but experience. Gruesome wars have been fought over the Christological creed, Harnack explained, even though Jesus had never represented himself as a god. Admittedly, Jesus qualified himself as the Son of God, but he only used this notion in a figurative sense of someone with intimate knowledge of the Father. Jesus also regarded himself as the Messiah, but, for Jesus and for his followers, this admittedly Judaic concept no longer corresponded to the image of a “warlike, god-sent ruler.” Instead, its meaning had passed “from a political and religious into a spiritual and religious one.” ⁸⁸ Jesus was the Messiah in the sense of a spiritual leader who guided men to the gospel, but he had no position in the gospel himself: “The Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son.” ⁸⁹ The social features of Christianity had not been directly shaped by Jesus, but were a natural consequence of the shared belief in the infinite value of every individual human soul. ⁹⁰ On a horizontal axis, the fatherhood of the Father and the moral example set by Jesus naturally implied the solidarity and brotherhood of men (who are all children of the Father).

If Harnack indeed did establish some genealogical relations between Jesus and his Judaic environment, these all concerned the husk of the message: “Husk were the whole of the Jewish limitations attaching to Jesus’ message; husk were also such definite statements as ‘I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ In the strength of Christ’s spirit the disciples broke through these barriers.” ⁹¹ By means of his distinction between husk and kernel, Harnack was able to nuance his pronounced anti-Judaic picture of Jesus. ⁹² An important example is his theory of Jesus’ double interpretation of

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⁸⁶ Only in the lectures on Protestantism did Harnack broach the possibility of baptism and the last supper being instituted by Jesus himself. According to Harnack, the original meaning of these rituals was, of course, purely symbolic, instead of sacramental: *What is Christianity?*, 298.

⁸⁷ Cf. the central thesis of Harnack’s monumental *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* in 3 volumes (1886, 1887, 1890) on Christian dogma as a post-Biblical Hellenistic creation. A new edition of this work has recently been published by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (Darmstadt, 2015).


⁹² For more details on the Judaic ‘husk,’ see the excellent overview in Lukas-Klein, *Das ist (christliche) Religion*, 28–31, and 70–73, where the author aptly summarizes (at 70): “In den Harnack’schen Vorlesungen werden ‘das christliche Eigene’ und ‘das jüdische Fremde’ in
the kingdom of God. On the one hand, Jesus was imbued with the hope of deliverance from Israel’s long suppression by foreign rulers. As a result, he indeed considered the kingdom eschatologically, as a future event which would bring forth a fully external rule by God in society. But, at the same time, he also advocated the highly original view that God’s kingdom is an already present, spiritual-moral link to God, realized in “the heart of individuals”: 93

There can be no doubt about the fact that the idea of the two kingdoms, of God and of the devil, and their conflicts, and of that last conflict at some future time when the devil, long since cast out of heaven, will be also defeated on earth, was an idea which Jesus simply shared with his contemporaries. He did not start it, but he grew up in it and he retained it. The other view, however, that the kingdom of God “cometh not with observation,” that it is already here, was his own. 94

For modern scholars, Harnack explained, such a juxtaposition is problematic, but for Jesus it was not: the eschatological view was easily spiritualized into the “already present kingdom,” which was, of course, the dominant conception in Jesus’ gospel. Beside Judaic eschatology, Harnack also acknowledged the influence of “the ethical system Jesus found prevailing in his nation,” but, again, he carefully disconnected Jesus’ particularly “pure” understanding of “the higher righteousness and the commandment of love” from Judaic history, by emphasizing that it really had no precedent whatsoever in religious history. All in all, comparative religion, for Harnack, was a tool to disentangle Jesus’ essential gospel from its Judaic background, and to prove the superiority of the former over the latter.

How, then, does one go from a religion that fully coalesced with a spiritual-moral experience to a fully developed Christian cult and creed, and, ultimately, to the institution of the Church? At a certain point, “externality” kicked in. According to Harnack, however, this did not happen in the first communities which remained perfectly true to the non-dogmatic and non-ritualistic teachings of Jesus. 95 Aside from the substantial modification produced by the belief in the resurrection and the corresponding hope for the imminent return of the resur-

93 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 60.
94 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 58.
95 Harnack did add—parenthetically—that there were some “well-marked traces” of Greek thought in Paul, Luke and John. Harnack, What is Christianity?, 215.
rected Christ, the first community was the “living realization” of Jesus’ gospel. Unsurprisingly, Harnack’s account of the first disciples was characterized by the same ambiguous relationship to Judaism, as that of Jesus himself. Moving on to Paul, Harnack almost ecstatically explained that he had been the one who truly “understood the Master and continued his work,” and “delivered the Christian religion from Judaism.” All last traces of Jesus’ Judaic past were now erased in order to root the gospel in “gentile soil.” Harnack hereby carefully avoided addressing the question of Paul’s involvement in the development of the Christian cult. Only at the end of his lectures on the apostolic age, and as a bridge to his subsequent discussion of Catholicism, he suggested:

But the founding of churches and “the Church” on earth brought an entirely new interest into the field; what came from within was joined by something that came from without; law, discipline, regulations for ritual and doctrine were developed, and began to assert a position by a logic of their own. The measure of value applicable to religion itself no longer remained the only measure, and with a hundred invisible threads religion was insensibly worked into the net of history.

This quote is the perfect conclusion for this brief summary of Harnack’s ideas, as it captures the perpetual ambivalence in his work on the question as to what extent Christianity was already “time-bound” before the Church entered the scene.

1.3 L’Évangile et l’Église

In order not to fall into the trap set up by Loisy’s strategic emphasis on his opposition to Harnack, it may be useful to begin this analysis by underlining that Loisy and Harnack were agreed upon the paramount importance of historical scholarship for the future of Christianity. Both scholars distanced themselves from their traditional orthodox colleagues by asserting that Christian faith needed to be reformulated so that it was no longer at variance with modern scientific-

96 Harnack summarized the basic features of the first community as follows (p. 165): “(i) The recognition of Jesus as the living Lord; (ii) the fact that in every individual member of the new community—including the very slaves—religion was an actual experience, and involved the consciousness of a living union with God; (iii) the leading of a holy life in purity and brotherly fellowship, and the expectation of the Christ’s return in the near future.”
97 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 187.
98 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 190.
99 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 196.
historical insights. Both were deeply convinced of the autonomy of history with regard to theology, and emphasized the significance of history for theology, instead of the other way around. The opposition between Harnack and Loisy was caused by their profound disagreement on what constituted the most accurate historical picture of early Christianity, which can be explained by the deep divergence between their philosophies of religion.¹⁰⁰ The central research question of L’Évangile et l’Église immediately reveals that their controversy was indeed not a purely historical discussion: “Our aim is only to determine if his ‘Essence of Christianity,’ instead of being an absolute religion, absolute Christianity, entities that have little chance of taking a place in history, does not rather mark a stage in Protestant development, or form merely a basic formula of Protestantism.”¹⁰¹ Throughout his volume, Loisy rebuked Harnack for his dangerous mix up of history and theology. By isolating the “essence” of Christianity from history, Loisy stated, Harnack had left the field of historical inquiry and, instead, presented “the profession of a personal faith in the form of a historical review.”¹⁰² The idea of an absolute, unchanging truth in Christianity caused an allergic reaction in Loisy, who was instantly reminded of the traditional Catholic belief in the absoluteness of dogma. For Loisy, Harnack’s solution was not much better than the neo-thomist subordination of history to theology which was so heavily restraining his own scientific autonomy.

As a Catholic, Loisy furthermore had major problems with Harnack’s conception of religion as a purely moral-spiritual experience. The fact that Harnack had projected his personal religion onto the original gospel of Jesus, and his corresponding conclusion that Catholicism had “perverted”¹⁰³ Jesus’ message, were completely unacceptable for Loisy. According to Loisy, religion is primarily a social institution, its collective character manifesting itself in ritual and in shared beliefs. The most-quoted sentence from L’Évangile et l’Église (“Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came”¹⁰⁴) indicates perfectly well that he agreed with Harnack on the fact that Jesus had not instituted the Church, but their parallel historical conclusions served completely opposite religious agendas. According to Loisy, this did not imply that the existence of the Church and the changes it had directed were illegitimate and discontinuous with regard

¹⁰⁰ The divergences and similarities in their philosophies of religions have been studied extensively in modern scholarship. For a good introduction: Hill, The Politics of Modernism, 127–132; for a more detailed account, see Poulat, Histoire, dogme et critique, 89 – 102.
¹⁰¹ Loisy, The Gospel and the Church, 22.
¹⁰² Loisy, The Gospel and the Church, 1.
¹⁰³ Harnack, What is Christianity?, 198.
¹⁰⁴ Loisy, The Gospel and the Church, 166.
to the original gospel. In fact, when one examines the real historical meaning of the gospel, it was Protestantism which seemed to be a historical side-product.

Loisy severely attacked Harnack’s distinction between ahistorical kernel and historical husk as being nonsensical, because the essence of Christianity is never different from its historical expressions. According to Loisy, it constantly changes according to new religious needs. In accordance with his evolutionary philosophy of religion, Loisy preferred the image of a tree, of the organic growth of Christianity from the seed that was Jesus’ gospel. Christianity’s true essence, he asserted, is its vitality and ability to assimilate and to change:

All these elements of Christianity, in all the forms in which they have been preserved, why should they not be the essence of Christianity? Why not find the essence of Christianity in the fullness and totality of its life, which shows movement and variety just because it is life, but inasmuch as it is life proceeding from an obviously powerful principle, has grown in accordance with a law which affirms at every step the initial force that may be called its physical essence revealed in all its manifestations? Why should the essence of a tree be held to be but a particle of the seed from which it has sprung, and why should it not be recognized as truly and fully in the complete tree as in the germ?

Loisy’s evolutionary philosophy of history not only entailed a more positive evaluation of the entire Christian tradition and a historical legitimization of the Church, it also allowed for a far more radical historical criticism and matching comparativism. In L’Évangile et l’Église, Loisy strictly distinguished between the tasks of the historian and of the theologian. The task of the historian is to understand the gospel of Jesus within its historical context and to describe historical change, while the theologian should be occupied with the necessary reformulation of the religious meaning of the gospel: “The gospel has an existence independent of us; let us try to understand it in itself, before we interpret it in the light of our preferences and our needs.” Loisy accused Harnack of a theolog-

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105 Or as Hill aptly formulated in *The Politics of Modernism*, 130: “the whole was kernel.”
106 It should be reminded that Loisy had developed this philosophy of religion before Harnack’s *Wesen*, and, in the first place as a reply to traditional Catholic theology. His philosophical views had been published pseudonymously in the Firmin articles.
108 Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, 8. In his correspondence with the German Liberal-Protestant scholar Adolf Jülicher, Loisy firmly repeated this argument. In November 1905, Jülicher had sent Loisy a copy of his as yet unpublished paper “Die Religion Jesu und die Anfänge des Christentums bis zum Nicaenum (325),” in which he had accused Loisy’s *EE* of a “poor con-
ical abuse of comparative religion: “It is [...] in the highest degree arbitrary to
decide that Christianity in its essence must be all that the gospel has not bor-
rowed of Judaism, as if all that the gospel has retained of the Jewish tradition
must be necessarily of secondary value.”¹⁰⁹ The comparison of Christianity to
other religions is a historical tool to uncover which non-Christian elements
have been incorporated in Christianity in order to satisfy the needs of new con-
verts. Loisy believed that Catholicism had absolutely nothing to fear from the
discovery of such genealogical interconnections with other religions, because
the assimilated elements had been profoundly transformed and thus had stop-
ped being pagan or Jewish once they had been incorporated in Christianity.
Moreover, it was implied in Loisy’s argumentation (but for logical reasons
never expressed explicitly) that the Church could only gain from acknowledging
such assimilations because they testified to her respect for the vitality of the gos-
pel. As such, Loisy’s comparative religion is well integrated in his Modernist re-
form program.

With Loisy’s philosophical framework well in mind, one can now understand
the many historical parallels the Catholic scholar drew between Christianity and
other ancient religions in L’Évangile et l’Église. His evolutionism allowed for a
quite advanced comparative inquiry. We can break Loisy’s approach down to
the following three points: (1) the intense interconnection of Jesus and contempo-
rary Judaism, (2) the genealogical relation between the first Christian communities
and pagan religions, and (3) the careful adoption of a universalizing anthropologi-
cal perspective for the early Christian interpretation of the Eucharist.

1.3.1 Jesus and Judaism

After a first section on the gospels as complex sources for the study of the his-
torical Jesus, two sections follow which discuss Jesus’ relationship to Judaism:
section II focuses on Jesus’ conception of the kingdom of heaven, while section
III discusses the titles Son of God and Messiah. Loisy painted a distinctly Judaic
picture of Jesus. Crucial for his historical reconstruction of Jesus’ original gospel

¹⁰⁹ Loisy, The Gospel and the Church, 10.
was Judaic eschatology. In line with the prominence of eschatological hope in contemporary Judaism, Jesus’ gospel mainly revolved around the expectation of the end of the existing world order and the hope for a subsequent renewal which would instigate the rule of God on earth.\textsuperscript{110} By emphasizing the Judaic-eschatological character of Jesus, Loisy took sides with the comparative approach of the \textit{Religionsgeschichtliche Schule}, in particular of Johannes Weiß, against Harnack.\textsuperscript{111} Harnack’s statement that Jesus had primarily considered the kingdom as an already present subjective spiritual-moral experience is not historical, but the result of a modern Liberal-Protestant projection on intentionally decontextualized biblical texts: “The historian must resist the temptation to modernize the conception of the kingdom.”\textsuperscript{112} Loisy admitted that Jesus’ teachings involved the preaching of moral repentance, but this was a condition to enter the future kingdom, and not an indication of an already existing inner kingdom.\textsuperscript{113}

To give an example of Loisy’s strategic argumentation, it may be pointed out that he chose to omit Harnack’s double kingdom theory. Loisy’s focus on the Judaic origins of Jesus’ conception of the kingdom certainly was far more consistent than Harnack’s, but we have seen that Harnack was aware of the historical importance of Jesus’ Judaic context, too. This specific misrepresentation of Harnack’s ideas had two advantages for Loisy. It highlighted the alleged scientificity of his own historical approach, and, for the Catholic readership Loisy addressed, it again added an apologetic touch to his less than orthodox historical ideas. Loisy’s emphasis on Harnack’s wrong individualist interpretation of the kingdom, allowed him to draw attention to the social dimension of the collective world end and salvation which is implied in his own Judaic-eschatological interpreta-

\textsuperscript{110} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 53.
\textsuperscript{112} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 12, 73. Especially Luke 17:20–21: “Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.’”
\textsuperscript{113} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 59: “The idea of the celestial kingdom is then nothing but a great hope, and it is in this hope or nowhere that the historian should set the essence of the gospel.”
tion. Catholicism is then an organic development out of Jesus’ gospel, while individualizing Liberal Protestantism should be seen as a product of discontinuity.

The logical consequence of Loisy’s emphasis on Jesus’ eschatological beliefs is that Jesus had never intended to found a new religion. His gospel was an enlargement of Judaism, but it still was profoundly Judaic:

He had no other pretension than to fulfill the law and the prophets; without doubt He wished to enlarge and perfect the former revelation, but, while enlarging and perfecting, He meant to retain it; He is not set before the world as the revealer of a new principle; if He never gives His definition of the kingdom of God it is because the kingdom of which He is the messenger and the instrument is identified in His thought, as in the minds of His hearers, with that that the prophets have foretold.¹¹

Contrary to Harnack, Loisy emphasized that Jesus had followed the Law. His moral teachings had also been perfectly Judaic, as were his gospel about the kingdom and his role in it as the Messiah. Jesus had not instituted a Christian cult, nor had he developed Christian doctrines or dogma.¹¹ And he had certainly not provided any guidelines for institutionalizing a primitive form of the Church. Since Jesus had believed that the coming of the kingdom was imminent, this kind of elaborations had simply been unnecessary.¹¹ Through his discovery of the importance of eschatology, Loisy developed ideas on Jesus’ (non-)relation to Christian ritual, doctrine and the Church, which were in themselves strikingly similar to Harnack’s. But behind their similar conclusions lurked substantial differences. Loisy’s views were the result of his intense historical contextualization of Jesus’ gospel within Judaism, while Harnack’s followed from his minimalist moral interpretation of the same gospel. Loisy’s Jesus considered Judaic rituals as “abstractions”: he followed them in anticipation of their radical transformation in the kingdom.¹¹ Harnack’s Jesus, by contrast, abolished these external religious forms, because they polluted the universal inward essence and linked it to one particular form of human culture. We will come back to this point when discussing Loisy’s ideas on the development of Christian doctrine and cult.

Loisy also applied his Judaic contextualization to the meaning Jesus attributed to the titles “Son of God” and “Messiah,” and to Jesus’ conception of his own role in the gospel. The “Son of God” title is not to be reduced to a purely psychological notion which indicates Jesus’ awareness of his special bond to

¹¹¹ For Loisy’s emphatic enumeration of the consequences of the eschatological meaning of the kingdom on Jesus’ thought: *The Gospel and the Church*, 81.
Instead, it is a Judaic concept which is equivalent to the Messiah title. As for Jesus’ qualification as the Messiah, Harnack had failed to understand the deeply eschatological meaning of this Judaic title, by explaining it as the title of a moral guide who leads people to the gospel. Loisy observed: “It is truly curious to see how embarrassed certain Protestant theologians become over this ‘Jewish’ conception [i.e. the Messiah], which they would willingly eliminate from the gospel and attribute to apostolic tradition in order to shape themselves a Christ after their own heart.” Loisy agreed that Jesus was a religious-spiritual guide, but it was not in this quality that he called himself the Messiah. Jesus believed himself to be the future Messiah, and as such, he expected to fulfill a prominent role in the kingdom to come. Loisy emphatically underlined that Jesus’ kingdom had not just been about God but also about the Son of God. In other words, he opposed the Liberal-Protestant view that the gospel was essentially about the “Man Jesus” and about his humanist ethics. The gospel was about the future and about the divine Christ. Loisy thus provided later Christology with a solid foundation in the original gospel, and established the continuity which Harnack had purposefully refused to the Catholic tradition. On the other hand, and in huge contrast with the traditional Catholic opinion, he agreed with Harnack that Jesus’ gospel did not contain any doctrine on the divinity of the Christ.

Harnack had substantiated his theory by Matt 11:27: “All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 137–138.


Compare, e.g., with Hegel’s ideas on Jesus and Judaism, Friedrich Hegel on Christianity: *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), 77: “A teaching different from that which the Jews already possessed in their sacred documents they were disposed to accept only from this Messiah. The hearing which they and most of his closer friends gave to Jesus was based in the main on the possibility that he was perhaps this Messiah and would soon show himself in his glory. Jesus could not exactly contradict them, for this supposition of theirs was the indispensable condition of his finding an entry into their minds. But he tried to lead their messianic hopes into the moral realm and dated his appearance in his glory at a time after his death.”

Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, 108: “There is no question of a doctrine to be put forward touching Himself and His office.”
theory about Jesus as the “future” Messiah thus stood at wide variance with both Harnack’s ideas and with traditional Catholic scholarship.¹²³

In spite of his in-depth historical criticism and comparative approach, Loisy in the end also felt the need to somehow save Christianity from the intricate historical dependencies he had established. At several points in L’Évangile et l’Église there are remarkable attenuating mechanisms, which reveal that he did establish a clear hierarchy between Judaism and Christianity. There is, for example, an omnipresent discourse of “inevitability” and “necessity,” and a clear distinction between faith and the symbols that express faith, which certainly reminds of Harnack’s ideas:

Jesus, on the earth, was the great representative of faith. Now, the religious faith of humanity always has been and always will be supported by symbols more or less imperfect [...]. The choice and the quality of the symbols are necessarily related to the stage of evolution of faith and of religion. The conceptions of the kingdom and of the Messiah are not merely the features that made it possible for Christianity to come forward beside Judaism, they are the necessary form in which Christianity had to be born in Judaism before spreading out into the world.¹²⁴

It is fair to say, however, that Loisy’s historical-critical ideas on the Judaic-eschatological character of Jesus’ gospel were, overall, advanced. To his critics at the École pratique, they unmistakably demonstrated that he was able to study early Christianity according to their strictly historical-critical standards. In fact, he proved to his predominantly Liberal-Protestant colleagues of the Fifth Section that he was even more capable to do so than Harnack, who had a well-deserved reputation in the field of history of Christianity, both in Germany and beyond. Harnack’s Wesen had actually met with little interest among the Protestant circles of the Fifth Section.¹²⁵ Harnack’s position on Judaism differed substantially

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¹²⁴ Loisy, The Gospel and the Church, 120.

¹²⁵ Harnack’s close connection to German politics may explain why the French Liberal-Protestant historians of the EPHE, who voiced the ideals of the French Third Republic, refrained from paying much attention to this work. On this topic see Pascale Gruson, “Entre la crise moderniste et les exigences de la modernité. Quelques questions posées par la réception de ‘L’essence du Christianisme’ en France,” in Adolfo von Harnack. Theologe, Historiker, Wissenschaftspolitiker, eds. Kurt Nowak and Otto Gerhard Oexle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 320–
from the Liberal-Protestant scholars who held the most powerful positions in the French history of religions, like, for example, Albert Réville (1826–1906) who was the then director of the Fifth Section and held the chair in history of religions at the Collège de France. First of all, their positive attitude toward comparative religion was distinctly different from Harnack’s reluctant position. The Liberal Protestants of the Fifth Section generally venerated Ernest Renan’s historical-critical scholarship on early Christianity (which means that a lot of attention was paid to Jesus’ Judaic background), even if they didn’t accept his theory on the Aryan victory over the inferior Semitic origins. As an example, we may mention Albert Réville’s Jésus de Nazareth (1897, in 2 volumes), which dedicated over 200 pages to the study of Judaism. Aside from Renan’s legacy, we should also point to the importance of the Dreyfus-affair as a historical context for Réville’s Jesus, which has been observed by Robert Priest: “Réville’s assertion of Jesus’s Jewishness appears to have been intimately related to his defence of Dreyfus’s Frenchness.” In a similar vein, Loisy’s profoundly Judaic Jesus should be seen against the background of his close personal relations with Salomon Reinach who was a leading personality of the pro-Dreyfus camp. All of this may help to explain Loisy’s easy access to the Dreyfusard salon of the Marquise Arconati-Visconti in 1908, who fiercely supported his candidature at the Collège de France, as we will see in the next chapter.

321. We will come back to the political ideology of the Sciences religieuses at the EPHE in the following chapter, where we also briefly discuss the importance of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71).


128 For the close link between Albert Réville and Renan: Priest, The Gospel according to Renan, 214–218.

129 Priest, The Gospel according to Renan, 217.

130 For Salomon Reinach see chapters 2, 3, and 4 (and the index).
1.3.2 Pagan Religion and the Development of Christian Doctrine and Cult

Loisy’s comparative study of early Christianity was not limited to its Judaic environment, but also took into account the importance of surrounding pagan cultures. From a purely historical point of view, the crux of the controversy with Harnack was not the issue of the genealogical interconnection of pagan religion and Catholicism. Unlike traditional Catholic scholars, Loisy wholeheartedly conceded the Church’s assimilation of pagan beliefs and rituals in its doctrine and cult. He did not limit this concession to the influence of “Greek intelligence” in dogma, which was acknowledged by the Church Fathers themselves and was quite unproblematic in traditional Christian scholarship.\(^\text{131}\) He also admitted pagan influences in Catholic rites, and in the much debated worship of the saints and of the Virgin.\(^\text{132}\) In stark contrast to Harnack’s negative evaluation of these religious developments, Loisy evidently regarded the assimilating role of the Roman Catholic Church as a necessary and positive expansion of the gospel. This is what he really meant when he wrote the famous sentence: “Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came; she came, enlarging the form of the gospel, which was impossible to preserve as it was, as soon as the Passion closed the ministry of Jesus.”\(^\text{133}\) Jesus’ Judaic message could never appeal outside of its originally Judaic context. Indeed, Jesus did not institute Christian ritual, doctrine or the Church, but for Loisy there was indissolved continuity between all these later developments and Jesus’ original teachings. The diametrical opposition to Harnack’s comparative argumentation on pagan religion resided in the fact that Loisy also considered the possibility of pagan influence in first century Christianity. In what follows, we will discuss his comparative ideas on the belief in the resurrection and on the development of the Eucharist.

Jesus’ Messianic consciousness is crucial for Loisy’s explanation of the belief in his resurrection. Jesus was put to death because he publicly presented himself as the future Messiah. Well aware that his life was in danger, Jesus personally developed a religious explanation which said that his future death actually was the condition for the future realization of the kingdom.\(^\text{134}\) Loisy basically provided two interdependent explanations for the belief in Jesus’ resurrection. The first explanation was psychological. Filled with the hopes of the future king-


\(^{133}\) Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, 166.

\(^{134}\) Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, 119, 123.
dom and the belief that Jesus would be the Messiah, the first followers were unable to accept that Jesus was gone, and that his teachings about the kingdom had been wrong. Jesus’ own providential account of his death helped them to “correct the brutal fact of the death by the glory of the resurrection.”¹³ Harnack, by contrast, had not explained the resurrection as the result of their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and neither had he believed that Jesus himself had speculated on the religious meaning of his death. Instead he had insisted on the enormous impression Jesus’ personality had made on the disciples: “it was a life never to be destroyed which they felt to be going out from him; only for a brief span of time could his death stagger them; the strength of the Lord prevailed over everything.”¹³⁶

But to explain, then, why this death was conceived of as an atonement, Harnack had adopted a psychological-anthropological approach which was not so very different from Loisy’s: “no reflection of the ‘reason’, no deliberation of the ‘intelligence’, will ever be able to expunge from the moral ideas of mankind the conviction that injustice and sin deserve to be punished, and that everywhere that the just man suffers, an atonement is made which puts us to shame and purifies us.”¹³⁷ Both historians relegated the belief in the historicity of the resurrection to the realm of theology, and explained the origins of the belief scientifically, as a collective, psychological correction by the first followers.¹³⁸

Loisy’s second explanation, however, was the complete opposite of Harnack’s. According to Loisy, the psychological correction could only happen because the disciples were pre-acquainted with conceptions of resurrection and immortality. While Harnack had explained the origins of these beliefs as a strictly internal Christian development (emanating from Jesus’ impressive force of life), as the result of a form of universal (Kantian) morality, Loisy drew attention to the pagan and Judaic environment in which Christianity was born. The following quotes illustrate the wide differences between the comparative approaches of Harnack and Loisy. Harnack, for his part, dismissed the hermeneutical value

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¹³5 Loisy, The Gospel and the Church, 130.
¹³6 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 175–176. Harnack also included other explanations: the belief in Jesus’ immortality also naturally followed from the idea of “infinite value of the human soul,” which could unite with that of God.
¹³7 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 171.
¹³8 The cognitive-psychological approach to the resurrection is still very much present in modern research on early Christianity. See, for instance, Gerd Theissen and Petra von Gemünden, eds., Erkennen und Erleben. Beiträge zur psychologischen Erforschung des frühen Christentums (München: Gütersloher Verlag, 2007).
of Platonism, or Persian and Judaic religion to explain the origin of the belief in the resurrection:

Whatever may have happened at the grave and in the matter of the appearances, one thing is certain: This grave was the birthplace of the indestructible belief that death is vanquished, and there is a life eternal. It is useless to cite Plato; it is useless to point to the Persian religion, and the ideas and the literature of later Judaism. All that would have perished and has perished; but the certainty of the resurrection and of a life eternal which is bound up with the grave in Joseph’s garden has not perished, and on the conviction that Jesus lives we still base those hopes of citizenship in an Eternal City which make our earthly life worth living and tolerable.¹³

Loisy reacted against these words of Harnack by emphasizing the importance of this historical-religious environment:

There is some exaggeration in dismissing Plato, the religion of the Persians, and the beliefs of Judaism after the exile, as though they had in no way aided in creating the certainty of eternal life, and as though this certainty came once and for all from faith in the resurrection of Christ. [...] Jesus Himself found among the Jews a belief in the resurrection of the dead, and He spoke conformably to this belief. The idea of His personal resurrection presupposes the acceptance of the idea of a general resurrection.¹⁴⁰

For Harnack, conceptions of immortality existing in the religious Umwelt are completely unnecessary to understand Christianity. Furthermore, his words are also an emphatic profession of faith on the absolute superiority of the own Christian tradition. Unlike Harnack, Loisy did not just consider these parallels in other religions as facilitators of the spread of Christianity. He decisively moved beyond the teleological discourse of “preparation” by establishing explicit genealogical interrelations between paganism and Judaism, and between this Judaism influenced by other traditions and Jesus himself. This way he not only annihilated the traditional theological ideas on the absolute originality of the revelation, but also questioned the presupposed “purity” of the earliest Christian traditions.

Loisy’s statements about the importance of a historical-comparative approach to the resurrection heralded his later theory (1911) about Paul’s transformation of the resurrected Christ into a dying and resurrecting savior god. The genesis of this theory has often been situated in 1910 (the year in which he read Reitzenstein’s influential Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen), but there are very good reasons to assume that it had actually been developed much ear-

¹³ Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 174–175.
lier. In *L’Évangile et l’Église*, Loisy didn’t discuss direct pagan influences on the beliefs in the resurrected Christ of the first Christian generations. The pagan elements had been indirectly transmitted via Judaism. From his private correspondence of 1903–1905, however, it is clear that he really did explore the option of direct pagan influences on Christianity. It was probably Salomon Reinach who triggered him to explore such cases. Reinach himself advocated an extreme comparativism and adhered to the so-called Christ Myth theory which denied Jesus’ historicity and (often) explained this fully mythical Jesus as the pendant version of the pagan mystery gods. Loisy’s negative reception of the Christ Myth will be discussed in great detail in our fourth chapter. This theory became a particularly prominent subject of discussion in France in the 1910s, but Loisy’s correspondence with Reinach shows that he had already enthusiastically plunged into the question in 1905.

Reinach’s importance to Loisy’s intellectual development in the early 1900’s cannot be underestimated. Reinach frequently visited Loisy and they wrote each other regularly, although they had widely different opinions on a vast array of topics in the field of religious studies. In an illuminating letter of December 10, 1905, which we will quote and discuss in more detail in chapter 4, Loisy showed to be very well acquainted with contemporary theories on the influence of pagan mystery cults and primitive Christianity. When interpreting his relatively moderate comparative statements in *L’Évangile et l’Église* (“there is some exaggeration”), we should consider the possibility that behind them lurked much more advanced views and stronger opinions on the importance of comparative religion. These views were obviously not expressed in their most radical form in Loisy’s Modernist manifesto, which—it is worth repeating—aimed at convincing (progressive) Catholics of the necessity of a scientific modernization, and therefore adopted a “soft approach.” This is not only confirmed by his corre-

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141 This has been pointed out by Jones, *Independence and Exegesis*, 69, who referred to Loisy’s early reviews of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* but largely overlooked the role of comparative religion in his *EE*. On *EE*’s relation to Loisy’s later work on the mystery cults, see Danny Praet and Annelies Lannoy, “Loisy’s comparative method in *Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*,” *Numen. International Review for the History of Religions* 64, 1 (2017): 68.

142 Note that Loisy also excluded these private views from his apology *Autour d’un petit livre*, see 119–129, where he discussed the transformations the preaching on the resurrected Christ underwent when entering the pagan world.

143 See also infra (chapter 2) for the relationship and correspondence between Loisy and Reinach. For their different opinions about the definition of religion, see chapter 3; about the function of myth: chapter 4.

144 Draft of Loisy’s letter to Reinach preserved in BnF, NAF° 15645, f° 383. In this letter, Loisy also compared Artemis Orthia to *Notre-dame-de-l’épine* of his birth place Châlons.
spondence, but it will also become clear from the analysis of his pseudonymous publications (1.4).

Although Loisy proceeded cautiously, *L’Évangile et l’Église* managed to send out the signal to the secular French world that he not only embraced a comparative approach to Judaism, but was ready to extend it to Christianity and pagan religions. The letters Loisy and Reinach wrote to each other between 1896–1908 show that a highly independent and anticlerical (and powerful) scholar like Reinach indeed regarded Loisy as a serious discussion partner for the comparative study of Christianity. When Reinach sent some of his most thoroughly comparative studies to Loisy, such as his paper “La flagellation rituelle” (1904) which discussed ritual flogging in various pagan cults and its persistence in popular Medieval customs, Loisy enthusiastically replied by adding other local Christian parallels. The early scientific connection between Loisy and Reinach is clear proof of Loisy’s growing credibility among scholars of the *science laïque*.

The preceding analysis may suggest that Harnack was the only one, then, who blurred the distinction between a strictly historical method and his religious beliefs when he dismissed comparative religion on the basis of religious truth claims about the uniqueness of Christianity. But when we take a closer look at Loisy’s overall argumentation in *L’Évangile et l’Église*, this appears to be a wrong conclusion. First of all, Loisy agreed with Harnack on the superiority of Christianity over the traditions which had influenced it. It has been mentioned before, though, that blaming Loisy and Harnack for this view is committing an anachronism, since it was a widely accepted view among religious and non-religious scholars at that time. What was, by contrast, truly detrimental to the scientificty of Loisy’s argumentation—also to the scientific standards of his own day—was the fact that he “theologized” his historical narrative by (repeatedly) stating that a “spirit” fueled Christian and pre-Christian assimilations:

If it [Christianity, my remark] was not (and it was far from being) the chance product of a combination of heterogeneous beliefs, from Chaldea, Egypt, India, Persia, and Greece, if it was born of the incomparable word and action of Jesus, it is none the less true that Jesus gathered up and vivified the best of the religious wealth amassed by Israel before Him, and that He transmitted this wealth not as a simple deposit that the faith-full of all time had but to guard, but as a living faith in the form of a collection of beliefs, which had to live and grow after Him, even as they had grown and lived before, by the preponderating influence

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146 Draft of Loisy’s letter to Reinach of May 22, 1904, preserved in BnF, NAF 15645, F° 374.
of the spirit that animated them. By isolating Him in history, Herr Harnack makes his Christ no greater, but only less intelligible and less real.\textsuperscript{147}

Even if Loisy asserted elsewhere that Jesus’ ideas were perfectly Judaic, he still felt the need to reaffirm the traditional belief in the incomparability of his “words and actions.” Furthermore, the remark on “the preponderating influence of the spirit that animated them” seems to point to some sort of supernatural intervention in history. The contrast in this one sentence raises the question as to whether such “rectifications” were genuine or strategic statements of Loisy’s. Did Loisy try to “soften up” his evolutionary reconstruction of Christianity (with its implicit invitation to the contemporary Church) by confirming Jesus’ superiority and by suggesting the possibility of a “spirit” which fueled religious change as part of a divine plan? For now, we must leave this question unanswered. We will come back to it when discussing the Neuilly Essais and the pseudonymous Firmin article in the next section of this chapter.

Just like in his discussion of Christian dogma, Loisy used comparative religion as a weapon against the traditional Protestant recrimination that the development of Christian cult was mostly a Catholic integration of pagan features into a presumably pure apostolic Christianity.\textsuperscript{148} Loisy not only transferred the comparative question from Harnack’s fourth century Catholic Church to pre-Christian Judaism, but also examined pagan influences in the first century cult. After underlining just how many pagan elements had already infiltrated in pre-Christian Jewish rites,\textsuperscript{149} he explained that a similar process of natural assimilation had also occurred during the early development of the Christian baptism and the Eucharist. While baptism had organically developed out of the Judaic rite which had been practiced by John, Jesus and the first disciples, the Eucharist—“the central act of worship”—had actually been a last-minute creation of Jesus himself. Quite transparently, Loisy still wanted to link the most important Catholic sacrament to Jesus himself, all the while trying to hold on to his view that

\textsuperscript{147} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 137–138.


\textsuperscript{149} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 234: “All the rest of the forms of worship may have been borrowed, before Moses, or after him, from other religions, with certain changes affecting the meaning, rather than the form, of the rites. While running the risk of corruption through the admixture of foreign elements, the Mosaic ritual realized successively the transformations that its preservation and progress demanded. [...] When human groups are thus mingled, not only physical and racial, but also intellectual and moral qualities, customs and traditions are blended together. More than one Canaanitish rite has been canonized in \textit{Deuteronomy or Leviticus}.”
Jesus hadn’t instituted Christian cult. According to Loisy, Jesus had broken away from his Judaic background at the very end of his life.\textsuperscript{150} His symbolic interpretation of the last Supper was the conscious ending of Judaic ritual, although it was not the conscious and direct beginning of a Christian cult. After Jesus’ death, the first community continued to regard their meals as anticipations of the kingdom, but they were also celebrated as a commemoration of the Passion.\textsuperscript{151} While Loisy granted to the Protestants that Jesus’ understanding of the meal had been symbolic, he did stress that the meals had instantly acquired a sacramental meaning after Jesus’ death.\textsuperscript{152} Jesus Christ was believed to be present, and, through the meals, there was believed to occur a transmission of “Divine life.”\textsuperscript{153} In \textit{L’Évangile et l’Église} Loisy didn’t provide any information on the roots of the Last Supper. Was this an ordinary meal, later ritualized by the disciples? Was it the ritual Passover meal? In itself, the fact that Loisy reserved this information for his \textit{Essais}, already gives us an indication that his views were anything but traditional-Catholic.

As for the early development of the Eucharist into a ritual of communion, Loisy combined an internal-psychological and a historic-religious explanation:

\begin{quote}
The real communion with Christ in the Eucharist was exacted by the Christian conscience as imperiously as the Divinity of Jesus; nevertheless the Divinity of Christ is not a dogma conceived in the spirit of Jewish theology, neither is the Eucharist a Jewish rite; dogma and rite are specifically Christian, and proceed from the apostolic tradition, without altering the fact that the influence of Greek wisdom can be perceived in the traditional way of understanding the first, and in the manner of understanding the second, an element doubtless at bottom common to several religions, if not to all, but which recalls rather the pagan mysteries than the unadorned conception of sacrifice of post-exilian Judaism. If it were not to become Greek, Roman, or German in its form of worship, Christianity must have avoided the Greeks, the Romans, and Germans; the adaptation of Christianity was inevitable.\textsuperscript{154}
\end{quote}

In the context of Loisy’s relation to the contemporary \textit{science laïque}, it is important to give some further thought to this brief, yet very meaningful comparative comment on the Eucharist. The statement is of course an integral part of his argumentation against Harnack, who had situated the influence of the mystery

\textsuperscript{150} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 230–231.
\textsuperscript{151} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 246–247.
\textsuperscript{152} When Loisy left the Church, his ideas on this particular point would change significantly. Jesus’ own understanding of the last supper was then no longer symbolic according to Loisy, it was just a plain meal. The commemoration of the last meal was no longer sacramental in the first communities. See chapter 4 (4.3).
\textsuperscript{153} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 233.
\textsuperscript{154} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 238–239.
cults in the third and fourth centuries. According to Loisy, the influence became operative from the very moment Christianity started to spread in places where the mystery cults were present, which happened well before the third century. Loisy did not provide any details on the exact timing, but it is reasonable to surmise that he again sought to close the strict Harnackian division between apostolic and post-apostolic evolutions. At the same time, though, the aforementioned quote is more than just another instance of the classical Catholic-Protestant feud. In the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, the interrelationship of early Christianity and the pagan mystery cults on the one hand, and the comparative theories on the origin of sacrifice on the other, gave rise to wide international debates which mobilized not only historians of Christianity, exegetes and theologians, but also historians of religions, anthropologists, and classicists.

Somewhat in passing, Loisy here showed to be familiar with what really were the most important debates in the religious studies of that time, and, more importantly even, he seemed ready to embrace the comparative methods of his secular colleagues to tackle these historical problems.

In the passage quoted, Loisy appeared to be considering two different comparative explanations for the early Christian development of the Eucharist. The first possibility is a specific relationship between early Christianity and the mystery cults: the interpretation of the Eucharist as a "communion with Christ" "recalls" the meaning of the sacrificial rites of the pagan mystery cults. Loisy did not claim that the similarity was the result of an imitation by Christians, but this is certainly what was implicitly suggested by his general theory on the "necessary assimilations," which started when the Christians entered into contact with

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155 Harnack, What is Christianity?, 221.
156 On the pivotal figures in these debates, see the contributions to Annelies Lannoy and Danny Praet, eds., ‘Between crazy mythologists and stupid theologians.’ Early Christianity and the pagan mystery cults in the work of Franz Cumont and in the history of scholarship (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, in preparation).
157 Our chapter 4 will discuss the debates about the pagan mystery cults, while chapter 5 will deal with those on sacrifice.
158 Harnack was, of course, also familiar with them. He discussed the mystery cults most extensively in his later Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten, Band II: Die Verbreitung (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrich, 1906), 270 – 275, where he allowed for some degree of influence on the propagation of Christianity, but rejected pagan influence on Christianity’s formation, which was the central focus of the contemporary debates. Salvatorelli, “From Locke to Reitzenstein,” 306, and Jan N. Bremmer, The rise of Christianity through the eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Rodney Stark (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2010), 39. In the German Protestant world, the participation was mostly assured by the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule and by classicists, as Hermann Usener, Richard Reitzenstein and Albrecht Dieterich, see infra, chapter 4 (4.1.1).
pagans. The theory of substantial influence of the pagan “oriental” mystery cults on apostolic Christianity was about to become the trademark of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Still, it is unlikely that these scholars were Loisy’s source of inspiration, because they published their most influential books on the mystery cults almost simultaneously to L’Évangile et l’Église or slightly later. At this point of Loisy’s intellectual trajectory, it makes more sense to look in the direction of his role model Ernest Renan, who had paid substantial attention to the mystery cults in his much quoted Marc Aurèle ou la fin du monde antique (1882), although Renan had been especially interested in the late-antique “rivalry” between these cults and Christianity, rather than in the origin of their similarities. Another option is that it was the work of Franz Cumont (1868–1947) which served as the main catalyst for Loisy’s views. His contributions to the Revue d’histoire et de littérature religieuses on the mystery cults were certainly “close to home” for Loisy. In fact, just one year before L’Évangile et l’Église came out, Cumont had published an article, “Le taurobole et le culte de Bellone,” in which he had drawn attention to pagan blood sacrifices and to the related belief that the absorption of the blood of the victim established an union between the worshipper, the victim and the god identified with the victim. Although this particular article of Cumont’s can certainly not account for Loisy’s statement (which is already included in the earlier Essais), it does show

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159 One of their first publications on the matter is Hermann Gunkel’s Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnis des Neuen Testaments (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903). See also Wilhelm Heitmüller, In Namen Jesu. Eine sprach- und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Neuen Testament, speziell zur altchristliche Taufe (Göttingen: Huth, 1903) and Id., Taufe und Abendmahl bei Paulus. Darstellung und religionsgeschichtliche Beleuchtung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903).
161 For Cumont’s collaboration to the Revue, see supra (introduction). His first contribution to the RHLR on the mystery cults was published in 1897: “La propagation des mystères de Mithra dans l’empire romain,” RHLR 2 (1897): 289–305, 408–423.
163 Note, though, that Loisy’s formulation (“the pagan mysteries”) in EE was more in conformity with the lexicon used in the history of religions, than the terminology in the Neuilly Essais,
that Loisy’s views fit in perfectly with the Belgian and French secular scientific contexts. Cumont’s studies on the so-called Oriental religions significantly intensified the debates about the pagan mystery cults and early Christianity in France. His famous volume Les Religions orientales dans le paganisme romain was the result of a series of lectures he gave at the Collège de France in 1905, and in Oxford (Hibbert Lectures) in 1906. Cumont would diplomatically divide the “scoop” of his new volume among the Modernist Revue d’histoire et de littérature religieuses and its Liberal-Protestant rival, the Revue de l’histoire des religions of the École pratique, which both got to publish one chapter of the upcoming book. Once again, Loisy’s comparative interests and methods were particularly close to those circulating in the secular academic study of religion.

Loisy’s second explanation entails that the conception of sacrifice as communion is a belief common to all religions. The importance of this suggestion—even if it seems to be discarded in favor of the first genealogical account—can hardly be overestimated. To say that Christianity borrowed from (inferior) pagan cults is one thing, but to acknowledge that the beliefs attached to the most important Christian ritual are basically the same as in any other religion, yet another. It has been pointed out that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries universalizing-anthropological comparative models gained popularity in the French history of religions. The anthropological postulate of the uniformity of the human mind allowed for an advanced comparative approach: advocates of these paradigms did not confine themselves to compare religions which had entered into historical contact, but compared religions of different times and places in order to uncover universal laws of independent evolution. Loisy’s statement on sacrifice as communion seems to echo the theory of one of the Anglo-Saxon pioneers of what François Laplanche has aptly called “La nouvelle

where he wrote: “[...] et dans la manière d’entendre le second quelque chose qui sans doute appartient au fond commun de toutes religions mais qui ressemble plus au mystère de l’antiquité profane.” Loisy, La Crise de la foi, 297.


166 See also chapter 2 (2.2.3), for more information on the methods that were being frequently used in the early 20th century French history of religions.
méthode comparative” (in contrast to comparative philology and mythology à la Müllner and Renan): William Robertson Smith’s theory on the totemic origins of sacrifice. This will indeed be confirmed by the *Essais* and the Firmin article “La religion d’Israël,” where Loisy called the theory by its proper name. Robertson Smith’s theory was highly important for the development of Loisy’s views on sacrifice after 1909, and it will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

By hinting at Robertson Smith’s theory, Loisy once again addressed an issue that was very topical in the contemporary French history of religions. Ivan Strenski’s extensive scholarship on the reception of Robertson Smith’s theory in fin-de-siècle France has shown that the intensity of the debates had everything to do with the theological consequences of the theory. The Liberal-Protestant leaders of the *École pratique* were wary of a theory that focused attention on the central position of ritual and on the essentially collective character of ancient religion, but they still found ways to incorporate it in their comparative research.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, Salomon Reinach and other “liberal Jewish iconoclasts”¹⁶⁸ like Durkheim and Mauss more enthusiastically received these views. Without explicitly mentioning it, Loisy used Robertson Smith’s theory on totemism to attack Harnack’s purely individualist-moral interpretation on the genesis of the Eucharist. And at the same time he showed that, just like the main protagonists of the French *science laïque* (and unlike Harnack), he considered the possibility of putting Christianity on a par with any religion. In our subsequent discussion of the *Essais*, it will become clear just how well he knew the universalizing paradigms used in the *École pratique*, and to what extent he was willing to apply them.

Before moving on to an intermediate conclusion, it is important to point out that in his section on worship, too, Loisy tried to amend the religious consequences of his thoroughly historical arguments. Our analysis has thus far been focused on the scientific-comparative argumentation in Loisy’s second “historical” chapter on worship. But after this historical refutation of Harnack, follows a final chapter in which Loisy returned to the viewpoints of the Catholic theologians which he had in fact been implicitly attacking throughout his refutation of Harnack.¹⁶⁹ In these Catholic-theological chapters of *L’Évangile et l’Église*, the abso-

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¹⁶⁷ Ivan Strenski, *Theology and the First Theory of Sacrifice* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2003), 98–100 for the Liberal Protestants and Salomon Reinach. For Strenski’s illuminating views, see especially *infra*, chapter 2 (2.2.3) and 5.


¹⁶⁹ Loisy’s section on dogma follows the same structure: chapter I: exposition of Harnack’s ideas; chapter II: refutation of Harnack, chapter III: return to the Catholic-theological position. For a close textual analysis of the chapters on dogma, see Talar, *(Re)reading, Reception and Rhetoric*, 16–17.
olute superiority of Christian worship over pagan worship is emphatically affirmed.\textsuperscript{170} And to legitimize the pagan assimilations of the Church, Loisy furthermore explained:

The life of a religion consists not in its ideas, its formulas and its rites as such, but in the secret principle which first gave an attractive power, a supernatural efficacy, to the ideas and formulas and rites. The sacraments have no meaning for the Christian except through Jesus or His Spirit acting in the material symbol.\textsuperscript{171}

1.3.3 \textit{L'Évangile et l'Église}: An Intermediate Conclusion

In \textit{L'Évangile et l'Église} Loisy presented himself as a historian and called for a consistent comparative study of early Christianity and its religious environment. But the book displays a complex interplay of different horizons, which leads to a remarkable alternation of highly scientific and religious arguments. Comparative religion was Loisy’s scientific tool for the historicization of all phases and aspects of Christianity. At the same time it was a weapon against Liberal Protestantism and against the contemporary Catholic Church. By rooting the earliest phases of Christianity in Judaic and pagan contexts, Loisy shattered the Protestant myth of a pure first century \textit{Urchristentum} and “normalized” the later pagan assimilations in the Catholic Church. By comparing Christianity to pagan religions and Judaism, he was able to substantiate his necessary assimilation theory and to introduce a perspective of relativity in the history of the Catholic Church. This relativity theory urged the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Church to continue its incessant renewal of the gospel and to reformulate its dogmas so that they were no longer at odds with modern science. This being said, we have seen that Loisy, too, was susceptible to religious adjustments of his historical argumentation, especially when he tried to link the creation of the Eucharist and the conception of the resurrection to the historical Jesus in order to establish direct continuity with the Church. Loisy’s book reveals a progressive concern for strictly historical arguments, but, as for Harnack, the scientific study of religion was also explicitly a means to a higher end: it served to historically legitimize the supremacy of his own religious tradition.

\textit{L'Évangile et l'Église} constitutes a pivotal step in Loisy’s intellectual development because of its adoption and propagation of the comparative—genealogical and analogical—methods used in the contemporary academic history of reli-

\textsuperscript{170} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 266.
\textsuperscript{171} Loisy, \textit{The Gospel and the Church}, 263.
gions. It should, however, be noted that the comparative argumentation was often concise and quite matter-of-factly, especially for pagan religion. In other words, Loisy rarely bothered to elaborate his views on the pagan infiltrations in early Christianity; time, place and nature of such interactions are never discussed. This absence is certainly to be explained by the envisioned broad readership of the book. Its main purpose was to demonstrate the importance of comparative religion on a general level, as the historical substantiation of theological evolutionism. Yet another explanation may be that Loisy was essentially trained as a biblical exegete and philologist.

The textual-exegetical arguments exposed in *L’Évangile et l’Église* are a lot more confident and elaborate than the historical-comparative ones.

Except for his one remark on sacrifice, we have not found any other instance of an anthropological-inspired universalizing perspective on Christianity. Is the omission of this kind of comparative framework connected to the hybrid religious-scientific nature of Loisy’s Modernist project? If the idea of Christianity’s interrelation to Judaism and paganism has disastrous consequences for its presumed originality, this is *a fortiori* the case when Christianity is included in a universal comparative paradigm. We see three possible explanations for Loisy’s omission: (1) the idea of universal laws of evolution indeed implied too much relativism with regard to Christianity, even for Loisy; (2) he had scientific objections and thought that the model of universal analogy had a more limited hermeneutical value than the genealogical framework; or (3) we are dealing with a strategic omission, meaning that Loisy did believe in the scientific value of this type of comparativism, but chose not to explore it in *L’Évangile et l’Église* in order not to hurt Catholic feelings more than he had done already by his theory of assimilation. A closer look at his private and pseudonymous writings can help us to determine which one(s) of these options is (are) the most valid.

1.4 History of Religion or History of Religions? The *Essais* and the Firmin Article “La Religion d’Israël”

Alfred Loisy extracted *L’Évangile et l’Église*, sometimes *verbatim*, from the historical chapters of the vast theological-philosophical-historical synthesis he had written in Neuilly. The *Essais* include a total of five historical chapters: *La re-

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172 From Loisy’s correspondence with Cumont we know that his knowledge of Greco-Roman religion was rather limited before the start of his career at the Collège de France. See *infra*, chapter 4 (4.2).
173 For a first introduction to the Neuilly *Essais*, see * supra*, introduction.
ligion d’Israël; Jésus-Christ; L’Évangile et l’Église; L’Église et le dogme chrétien; and L’Évangile et le culte catholique. L’Évangile et l’Église is based on the latter four. Overall, Loisy’s historiography of Christianity is fairly consistent in both texts. Scholarship by Harvey Hill and by Rosanna Ciappa has shown that the most substantial difference concerns Jesus’ Judaism.¹⁷⁴ In the few years between writing the Essais and L’Évangile et l’Église, Loisy clearly developed a more radical historical criticism, which especially disclosed itself in the greater level of importance attached to Jewish eschatology in his analysis of Jesus’ gospel.¹⁷⁵ Hill has furthermore demonstrated that this change in historical views went hand in hand with a far more strict division of theology and history. In the Essais, the lines between historical and theological arguments are indeed often non-existing or vague.¹⁷⁶ The progressive distinction coincides with Loisy’s changing scholarly ambitions after his entrance at the École pratique in 1900.

Rather than entering into the minutiae of the differences between L’Évangile et l’Église and the Essais, we will instead focus on the illuminating comparative argumentation in the first “historical” chapter of the Essais: “La religion d’Israël.” While the content of the last four historical chapters was integrated into L’Évangile et l’Église, this first chapter was meant to be published (in three parts) in the series of pseudonymous Firmin articles. In the end, only the first section of this long chapter got published (1900), because Cardinal Richard condemned the article and the Revue du clergé français stopped the publication of the following two parts.¹⁷⁷ Loisy thereafter decided to publish the entire chapter as an individual volume, La Religion d’Israël (1901) which he only distributed privately.¹⁷⁸ Of the six articles that were finally published in the “Firmin” series, the first five are philosophical demonstrations of Loisy’s theory of religion, while the final article “La


¹⁷⁵ In the Essais Loisy gave a far more moral interpretation of Jesus’ kingdom, which made his analysis much more similar to Harnack’s: Hill, “Loisy’s L’Évangile et l’Église in light of the ‘Essais,’” 82–83.


¹⁷⁸ As pointed out by Morrow, “Alfred Loisy’s Developmental Approach to Scripture,” 325–326, the first edition of the book La Religion d’Israël (1900), which was the unaltered chapter of the Essais, is very different from the second edition (1908), which is actually a completely new book.
religion d’Israël” exposed the corresponding historical and exegetical methodology.\(^{179}\) This Firmin article is the unaltered version of the first section of the chapter in the *Essais*.\(^{180}\) Although Loisy knew he would be easily recognized as the author of the Firmin articles, “La religion d’Israël” is definitely another type of text than *L’Évangile et l’Église*. It is a more free and less strategic expression of his thought, and it adopts a historical-methodological focus which is virtually absent in the latter volume. The article allows a more direct access to the theoretical views on comparative religion that were implicitly underpinning the volume.

But before discussing this article, we should mention that the Neuilly *Essais* and related Firmin articles were the result of Loisy’s ambition to develop a Catholic *science de la religion* that could meet the standards of the *science laïque*, and served as the intellectual pillar for the modernization of the Church and as an apology against Liberal-Protestant attacks.\(^{181}\) The *Essais* reflect his attempt to turn relativity into the founding principle of a general philosophy of religion, which applied the ideas of evolutionism and of relativity to all aspects of Christianity, including the cult and the ecclesiastical institution itself, and to all periods of Christianity, including its Judaic ancestor. Extensive research of Loisy’s Modernist philosophy has shown that it was indebted to the Catholic theologian John Henry Newman (1801–1890), who had been especially interested in the development of doctrine.\(^{182}\) Loisy especially wanted to take Newman’s theological notion of development to a higher, more historically substantiated level. In his *Essais*, he insisted on the necessity for Catholic scholars to gain deeper knowledge on the history of ancient religions, on the original meaning of sacrifice, on the “fonds primitif” of Christianity, etc., in other words, about all the issues debated in the contemporary academic discipline of history of religions.\(^{183}\) To convincingly substantiate the principle of relativity, he argued, the historical out-

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179 Jeffrey Morrow has studied Loisy’s exegetical argumentation in “La religion d’Israël” in the aforementioned paper “Alfred Loisy’s Developmental Approach to Scripture.”

180 Ciappa, “La réforme du régime intellectuel de l’Église catholique,” 568. We will quote from the chapter from the *Essais* on the following pages.


182 For a nuanced account of Loisy’s relationship to Newman, and a comprehensive overview of the vast literature on the subject, see Morrow, *Alfred Loisy & Modern Biblical Studies*, 133–142.

183 Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 76 and 80. This part of the *Essais* has been published as A. Firmin, “Le développement chrétien d’après le Cardinal Newman,” *Revue du clergé français* 1 décembre (1898): 5–20, and has been translated in Talar, *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis*, 3–16.
look should indeed be large. Do the *Essais* (and the published pseudonymous equivalents) reveal a Loisy who was ready to do history of religions, instead of history of (Christian) religion? The answer is yes and no.

The *Essais* show that for Loisy, the necessary adoption of a larger historical scope was first and foremost tantamount to the extension of the chronological frame within the study of Christianity. This means that he stuck to the study of Judeo-Christian tradition, but argued for tracing its history all the way back to its prehistorical beginnings. Christianity, Loisy explained, was a development out of post-exilic Judaism, which in turn stemmed from prophetic Judaism, which itself had its origins in primitive *Jahwism*, which had developed out of the religion of the patriarchs, which had its roots in the religion of prehistoric humanity:

> While Newman himself had limited his scope to Christianity, Loisy was convinced that his developmental theology was the interpretation key for the entire religious past, as well as the best guarantee for the future of religion. This development, as he significantly added, was the result of the supernatural action of a well-hidden divine *force* operative in history.

> It is very meaningful that throughout the *Essais*, Loisy consistently spoke of *histoire de la religion* and not of *histoire des religions*. This in itself is an indication of the fact that Loisy’s vertical-chronological extension of the historical scope was not be accompanied by a horizontal expansion. Comparisons with non-Judeo-Christian religions were important to Loisy in so far as they helped him to identify pagan assimilations in the Judeo-pagan tradition, and, thus, to

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184 Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 81.
historically attest evolution. But comparative religion did not, or only rarely, serve to uncover an analogy between the evolution of Christianity and the historical development of other religions which were not necessarily chronologically and geographically related to Christianity or Judaism. The quote above illustrates particularly well how the *Essais* paradoxically reveal an argumentation which is at the same time more scientific and more religious than the one in *L’Évangile et l’Église*. More scientific because Loisy pushed his evolutionary theory to the utmost limit by establishing continuity between primitive religion at the earliest stages of humanity and Christianity. Clearly, he thought it wise to suppress any reference to the “religion of prehistoric humanity” in *L’Évangile et l’Église*. On the other hand, his religious discourse is much more pronounced in the *Essais*.¹⁸⁵ In *L’Évangile et l’Église* the motor behind the “necessary” historical evolution was vaguely indicated as a “spirit.” The *Essais* show that we should not consider this religious intrusion in Loisy’s scientific discourse as a strategic accommodation to the Catholic Church so as to help it digest his Modernist program. At the time of writing, Loisy genuinely believed in divine intervention in history.

To account for what thus seems to be a genuine opposition between science and faith in his thought, we should draw attention to the complex psychological implications of his progressively critical scholarship. This psychology is a common feature among Catholic Modernist scholars who tried to reconcile their critical findings with their faith and with their membership of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁸⁶ The conclusions of their critical scholarship contradicted everything

¹⁸⁵ Note the difference, though, between the *Essais* and the corresponding Firmin article “Le développement chrétien d’après le Cardinal Newman.” See the English translation in Talar, *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis*, 9: “In order to allow the theory of development its proper amplitude by extending the historical base without which it would be nothing, its principle needs to be more explicitly drawn out and applied, in greater detail than was done by Newman himself, to the whole of the history of religion since the origins of humanity. This principle, which he applied mainly to the history of Christianity in relation to the Gospel, also applies to the Gospel in relation to Judaism and to the Mosaic religion in relation to what preceded it. For Christianity is in a very true sense a development from postexilic Judaism, which is a development from the religion of the prophets, which is a development from primitive Mosaic Yahwism, which is a development from the religion of the patriarchs, which had its beginnings in the religion of prehistoric humanity. The great moments of revelation which mark the different phases of this development do not upset its continuity [...].” On the question of continuity—discontinuity, see also infra, chapters 3 to 5.

¹⁸⁶ See especially C.J.T. Talar, “The Faith of a Rationalist. Prosper Alfaric on Christian Origins,” in Lannoy and Praet, eds., ‘Between crazy mythologists and stupid theologians,’ in preparation: “For any number of Modernists, particularly in France, one may construct a template, tracking their evolution from pious childhood through seminary formation; from initial tensions between
they had been taught to believe since at young age. Coming to terms with such ground shaking scientific conclusions, implied a thorough reconsideration of one’s religious identity and this was very rarely a matter of swift, clear-cut transformations. The growing scienticity of Loisy’s comparative ideas ran parallel to his progressive emancipation from the Catholic Church. This emancipation was a long process which was significantly accelerated by his disappointment about the Church’s systematic rejection of his reform program, and, as we will see in chapter 5, by World War I.

Loisy extensively discussed the question of primitive religion in the first section of his Neuilly chapter/Firmin article “La religion d’Israël.” His quest for the most primitive stage of Judaism naturally compelled him to address the question of a universalizing anthropological approach to religion. Had there been a universal primitive religion at the dawn of humanity, and if so, why not extend the universality to the later development from that shared origin? Loisy gave extensive thought to these questions. The Essais show that the single sentence in L’Évangile et l’Église about the potential universality of sacrifice conceptions, was not just a stray thought but the result of careful consideration. The late 19th and early 20th century academic study of the history of religions developed a whole spectrum of theories on laws of religious development. Loisy decided to focus his attention on the one he had found in August Sabatier’s Esquisse d’une philosophie de la religion d’après la psychologie et l’histoire (1897), the book which he had also discussed in several other parts of his Essais.¹ Sabatier (1839–1901) held the chair in ancient Christian literature at the École pratique (for which Loisy would apply in 1901).¹ He was a Liberal-Protestant philosopher and theologian with a distinct openness toward comparative religion.¹

traditional belief and modern scholarship to attempts to resolve the challenges posed by critical exegesis, critical philosophy, or modern democracy; through erosion of faith to final unbelief. While details vary with each individual, the overall trajectory is applicable.”

¹ And in the corresponding Firmin articles, Talar, Prelude to the Modernist Crisis, xvi.

¹ Sabatier was, however, a fierce advocate of the conservation of the faculties in Protestant theology at the State Universities: Laplanche, La Crise de l’origine, 127. Sabatier’s religious-theological ideas were close to Harnack’s (as also pointed out by Reardon, Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 208–210.

Sabatier’s evolutionary model relies on a distinction between the mythological (paganism), the dogmatic (Catholicism and Orthodox Protestantism), and the final psychological-spiritual stage of religion, which in his view is closest to the psychological experience religion actually is. These stages of progressive development further break down into a number of sub-stages. In his analysis of Sabatier’s ideas, Loisy especially focused on the development of the conceptualization of the divine, which Sabatier schematized as follows: (1) religion originates in fetishist animism; (2) the spirits become autonomous beings and they are structured in polytheistic systems; (3) the power of the leader of the tribe, and later, of the nation, is reflected in the supreme god who holds the highest position in the pantheon. Gradually polytheism evolves toward monolatry; (4a) the monotheism of the Indo-European family is morally perfected by the philosophers, but it can never compete with (4b) the truly moral monotheism which was developed by the prophets of Israel.

The one thing Loisy appreciated about this and similar evolutionary schemes is that they allow historians to impose some hypothetical structure on the mass of heterogeneous historical evidence. But other than that, he felt that their usefulness was extremely limited. His objections can be categorized into two groups: (a) general objections which basically apply to any historical model of universal religious evolution, and (b) specific objections to the scheme proposed by Sabatier. To start with (a), Loisy was clearly bothered by the universality claim and the corresponding postulate of fundamental unity of human behavior and thought. He allowed for some degree of psychological unity, but this was limited to “l’homme primitive.” With Sabatier (and Victorian anthropologist Edward B. Tylor) Loisy readily acknowledged that the origins of religion were universally animistic, but he strongly opposed the idea of a universal law of evolution. Such generalizing theories, he explained, are detrimen-

190 Sabatier exposed his ideas on the history of religions in chapter 4 “Le développement religieux de l’humanité,” of his Esquisse d’une philosophie de la religion d’après la psychologie et l’histoire (Paris: Fischbacher, 1897), 103–136. He discussed the lines of development thematically: first the gradual expansion of the geographic frame (tribal, national, universal), then the progressive development of the conception of the divine (animism, polytheism, monotheism), finally the development of rituals with focus on the spiritualization of prayer. For Sabatier’s views on prayer as the most important form of cult, and his dissension with the sociological school see Donald A. Nielsen, “Auguste Sabatier and the Durkheimians on the Scientific Study of Religion,” Sociological Analysis 48 (1987): 283–301.
191 Reymond, Auguste Sabatier et le procès théologique de l’autorité, 69.
192 Sabatier, Esquisse d’une philosophie de la religion, 120–123.
193 Loisy, La Crise de la foi, 127.
194 Loisy, La Crise de la foi, 93.
tal to the factual complexity and heterogeneity of historical reality. Instead, Loisy asserted, religions follow distinct individual courses of development. This particular course of development is determined by their interaction with other religions, or the lack thereof. The *Essais* show that, at this point of his intellectual trajectory, Loisy’s thought on religious change is essentially diffusionist. Each “race” has its own specific religious features; when religious agents migrate, these features travel along and mingle, causing religious change. For the religion of the “ancient Semites” Loisy used a typifying discourse which explicitly relied on Renan (“La race sémitique a eu le don d’intuition profonde, de passion ar-dente, de volonté tenace [...]”¹⁹⁵), but he rejected the Renanian subordination of the intuitive, passionate, tenacious “Semitic spirit” to the “Aryan genius.”¹⁹⁶ In this context, it is interesting to point to a feature of Loisy’s *Évangile et l’Église* which has hitherto remained unmentioned. When discussing the differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, Loisy lapsed into a pronounced nationalist discourse: “In Rome, and in the Latin countries, religion is readily conceived as a discipline and as a social duty. For the German races, it is a principle of inner life [...]”¹⁹⁷ Such a nationalist-ideological approach to the history of Christianity may help us to understand the completely unbridgeable divide between Harnack and Loisy during WWI, which will be discussed in the final chapter (5.1.1).

¹⁹⁵ Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 131.
¹⁹⁷ Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, 201. This nationalist discourse is an integral part of Loisy’s anti-Protestantism, see page 162: “Had there been any actual autonomy of the individual Churches, Christianity would have been completely submerged in superstition and Germanic feudalism.”
Loisy’s second critique of Sabatier’s evolutionary framework concerned the underpinning idea of a linear and systematic progressive evolution. Loisy certainly didn’t deny that religious history was a history of progress, but he did assert that only the Judeo-Christian tradition displayed a regular line of progress. As for the non-Judeo-Christian religions, there were “various influences” which accelerated religious progress in one given people, but slowed down or even destroyed progress in another. Although people were at times driven to downright folly because of “moral, intellectual or physical deficiencies,” Loisy also asserted that mankind always had “a sense of what was true and what was good,” allowing it to eventually develop or adopt “a pure” religion like Christianity.¹⁹⁸

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, the “Religion d’Israël” chapter shows that Loisy struggled with the tension between innovation and tradition he found lingering in the evolutionary multi-phased schemes at use in the history of religions. The compartmentalization of religion in different types, which correspond to stages in the overall religious evolution of mankind, presented a major problem to his conception of evolution in terms of “organic growth” and “continuity.”¹⁹⁹ Between the phases in those models of development Loisy perceived fault lines, which implied that, when a religion enters a new phase, something of the previous phase is irrevocably lost. The mere suggestion of discontinuity and rupture in history made models with successive stages of evolution completely unsuitable for his own intellectual project. To accept this intellectual frame was to reject the uninterrupted continuity between the original gospel of Jesus and the Catholic Church. And to reject this continuity was to give up the principal argument for the necessary modernization of that Church. We will see that long after Loisy’s excommunication, the tension between continuity and discontinuity in the history of religions remained a focal point of his comparative work.

Loisy’s “continuity view” ran totally counter to that of the Liberal-Protestant leaders of the Fifth Section of the École pratique.²⁰⁰ Ivan Strenski has rightly pointed out that Albert Réville was a real advocate of “a non-transitive or discontinuous view of historical change,” a view shared by his son and successor at the

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¹⁹⁸ Loisy, La Crise de la foi, 128.
¹⁹⁹ Loisy, La Crise de la foi, 127.
²⁰⁰ Albert Réville, Prolégomènes de l’histoire des religions (Paris: Fischbacher, 1886), 71: “Il est un facteur qui pourrait très bien expliquer la plupart de ces traits communs, sinon tous [...]. Ce facteur, beaucoup trop négligé, c’est l’unité de l’esprit humain s’appliquant à résoudre les mêmes questions avec les mêmes éléments de solution.”
Collège de France, Jean Réville.\textsuperscript{201} Still, it would be wrong to oppose Loisy’s view to the entire section, because not all of its Liberal-Protestant members were in favor of universalizing paradigms to study the history of religions. Maurice Vernes for instance adopted a very skeptical attitude toward the approach of the Révilles.\textsuperscript{202} And his skepticism was shared by several other protagonists of the academic history of religions, like the ancient mystery cult specialists Jules Toutain and Franz Cumont, who concurred in favoring Vernes’s historical-empiricist “stick to the sources” method.\textsuperscript{203} Once again, it is important to emphasize that what really made Loisy different from all these aforementioned scholars, was the recurrent infiltration of a distinct and explicit theological-supernatural discourse in his historical argumentation. At the end of his discussion of primitive Judaism, he for instance added that nothing was more helpful to understand the unique supernatural development of Judaism than to compare this religion with contemporary pagan cults. In a first phase, these religions showed striking similarities, but these gradually disappeared: what came to full force and fruition in Judaism, was suffocated (“étouffés”) by myth and liturgy in pagan cults.

Rien n’aide mieux à concevoir le développement surnaturel de la religion israélite, que cet examen d’institutions qui touchent à leur origine à un état de la pensée religieuse très analogue à celui dont témoignent les cultes païens. La distinction s’affermit et grandit entre la religion israélite et les religions païennes par la force et l’accroissement extraordinaire que prennent en Israël certains germes qui, dans les cultes païens, sont restés étouffés sous la tradition mythologique et liturgique. Dans la religion israélite, ils ont modifié la tradition, ils en ont renouvelé l’esprit, en attendant qu’ils fussent assez puissants pour en laisser


\textsuperscript{202} On Vernes’s methodological breach with the Révilles, see Strenski, “The Ironies of Fin-de-Siècle Rebellions,” 162–165.

Loisy’s claims about the singularity of each religious evolution find their origin in his view that a supernatural force was at work in Judaism, which prepared it for giving birth to Christianity and leaving behind its own outdated symbols. This force remained dormant in pagan religions.

As for the more specific criticism of Sabatier’s animism-polytheism-monotheism scheme, Loisy heavily opposed Sabatier’s reversal of the traditional *Urmonotheismus* theory. Clearly, he had problems to accept the logical consequences of the by him acknowledged animistic origins of religion, i.e. that Judaic monotheism had developed out of polytheism. Loisy adjusted this picture by explaining that the religion of Israel showed very early signs of a primitive form of monotheism and always contained the “seed” of the conception of an almighty god. At first, there must have been multiple spirits, but the polytheistic nature of the primitive Israeliite religion was not a “real and practiced polytheism,” it was instead an “animism neutralized in one sovereign spirit.” According to Loisy, the development of polytheism in ancient pagan religions was primarily generated by a mix of civilizations. An isolated tribal religion like that of the Israelites managed to stay clear from such mixtures. Against Sabatier (and likeminded historians of religions), Loisy furthermore argued that polytheistic religions can never truly develop into monotheism. Polytheism remains polytheism until it is replaced by Christian monotheism.

To conclude this discussion of the “Religion d’Israël” chapter, we briefly want to return to Loisy’s ideas on primitive sacrifice. In *L’Évangile et l’Église* we caught a glimpse of his openness toward an anthropological approach to sacrifice. The “Religion d’Israël” text shows that Loisy was indeed thinking of Robertson Smith’s theory on totemism when he formulated this suggestion, and this was also noticed by Salomon Reinach who greatly admired the Scottish

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204 Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 141–142.
205 For a teleological reading of Judaic history, see especially Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 162–163 (“Le judaïsme a connu son immense destin historique par le christianisme”).
206 Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 129.
207 Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 145.
208 Loisy, *La Crise de la foi*, 129.
209 Interestingly, Sabatier himself had made a distinction between the monotheism which developed the Indo-European religions and the superior moralist monotheism of the Semites. Sabatier, *Esquisse d’une philosophie de la religion*, 122.
Old Testament scholar.²¹⁰ We have seen that Loisy insisted against his Liberal-Protestant opponents that religion is a social institution, consolidated in the collective performance of rites which establish a “communion” between the community and the worshipped god. Robertson Smith provided Loisy with the perfect scientific foundation of these ideas. Robertson Smith had equally insisted on the dominant position of sacrificial ritual in ancient religions, and his theory on totemism underlined the social function of sacrifice. In our fourth chapter we will discuss Loisy’s intellectual relationship with Robertson Smith in more detail, and especially focus on the very different religious views which underpinned their scientific theories of sacrifice.²¹¹ With regard to Loisy’s comparative views on Christian ritual, there is just one last difference between the Essais and L’Évangile et l’Église which deserves our attention. In the latter work Loisy never explained the origins of the Eucharist. He only referred to the “communion” interpretation when discussing the later development of the beliefs attached to the ritual. In the pseudonymous Essais, he explicitly wrote that Jesus had continued an existing ritual of sharing bread and wine, which was perfectly analogous to other ancient oriental religions and based on the same idea of communion.²¹²

All in all, we can say that the question “Is Loisy ready to do history of religions” calls for a nuanced answer. While Loisy’s argumentation against Sabatier’s model certainly reveals the intention to protect the distinctness of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the analysis of the Essais has also uncovered his highly consistent emphasis on Christianity’s comparability, his acceptance of contemporary theories on animism and totemism, and his willingness to apply

²¹⁰ Loisy, La Crise de la foi, 136: “L’idée fondamentale du sacrifice apparaît encore assez clairement dans les anciens textes: une victime de choix, une victime sainte sert à fonder ou à raffermir la société vivante du dieu et de ses fidèles, moyennant la participation à une même chair sacrée, qui est censée contenir la vie divine, commune au dieu de la tribu et à ses membres. D’où que vienne cette persuasion, qu’elle se rattaché plus ou moins à ce qu’on a appelé le totemisme, à l’idée que le dieu ancêtre a la forme d’une espèce animale dans laquelle il est comme incarné, ou bien à une autre façon, à une façon nécessairement assez analogue, de concevoir le rapport de la vie animale avec la vie divine et la vie humaine, il paraît évident que telle est la signification originelle du sacrifice ; une communion de vie divine par l’immolation d’une victime, identifiée en quelque façon au Dieu lui-même et que s’incorporent les fidèles avec le dieu.” When Reinach wrote to Loisy to congratulate him on his condemned Firmin article, he pointed to Loisy’s unnamed source of inspiration: “Vous trahissez l’influence de cet admirable Robertson Smith.” See the letter of Reinach to Loisy, s.d., BnF, NAF 15660, F° 241.

²¹¹ For Loisy’s intellectual relation to Robertson Smith, see infra, chapter 4 (4.3.2) and 5 (5.3.1.2); for Loisy and the Durkheimians, see infra, chapter 3 (3.3) and 5 (5.3.1.3).

²¹² Loisy, La Crise de la foi, 187.
them to Judaism and Christianity. Methodologically speaking, Loisy had become a very close ally of the French institutionalized history of religions. Why, then, did he resign from the École pratique in 1904?

1.5 The Consequences for Loisy’s Position at the École pratique

We have seen that the Catholic Church grimly accepted Loisy’s integration in the École pratique as conférencier libre in 1900. Students of the Institut catholique were discouraged by local hierarchies to attend Loisy’s course starting from March 1901, but his local superior Cardinal Richard did not intervene in the content of the course.²¹³ The attitude of the Church changed in 1903 when it put L’Évangile et l’Église on the Index. Loisy’s book was officially condemned by the Holy Office on December 16th, 1903, together with four other volumes: La Religion d’Israël, Études évangéliques, Autour d’un petit livre, and Le Quatrième Évangile. As a result, there was an instant multiplication of Loisy’s audience at École pratique, so much so that the classroom simply became too small to fit all curious listeners.²¹⁴ In 1904 Loisy resigned from the École and completely disappeared from public life.²¹⁵ His resignation was the result of his negotiations with Rome about his submission to the decision of the Inquisition, and was most probably intended to avoid excommunication.

In this final section of our chapter on Loisy’s Modernist career, we briefly discuss the reactions of his Liberal-Protestant colleagues at the École to this resignation.²¹⁶ Loisy’s correspondence with these scholars shows that he carefully strategized this exit. After its condemnation by the Church, L’Évangile et l’Église came to symbolize Loisy’s affirmation of the superior scientific study of religion propagated by the Third Republic. But with the impending law on the separation

²¹³ In his Mémoires, II, 19 Loisy explained that Richard had someone following Loisy’s classes and reporting about them to him. The information was transmitted to Rome.
²¹⁴ Loisy, Mémoires, II, 369.
²¹⁵ He moved to the French countryside, and stayed in a cottage provided by the Thureau-Dangin family, with whose members Loisy was close; Émile Goichot, Alfred Loisy et ses amis (Paris, Cerf: 2002), 78–79. See also chapter 2.
²¹⁶ The different phases in Loisy’s relations to Rome between 1903 and his final excommunication in 1908 have been identified sufficiently by Loisy himself and in modern research on the documents of the Office: Claus Arnold, “Loisy, la congrégation de l’Index et le Saint-Office (1900–1908),” in Alfred Loisy cent ans après. Autour d’un petit livre, eds. François Laplanche, Ilaria Biagioli, and Claude Langlois (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 61–68. On Loisy’s submission in 1904, see Houtin and Sartiaux, Alfred Loisy, 117–127.
of State and Church (1905), the academic position of Loisy became untenable when he showed no signs of wanting to leave the Church after his condemnation of 1903.\textsuperscript{217} No scientific and personal appreciation for Loisy could prevent that there was wide apprehension among the protagonists of the Fifth Section over the enormous conflict of interest raised by Loisy’s attitude.

To fully grasp the reactions towards Loisy’s final resignation in 1904, it is important to mention that the anti-scientific climate in the Catholic Church had in fact been straining the relations between the Modernist scholars and the institutionalized \textit{Sciences religieuses} since the late 1890s. It is true that the Church waited until 1907 to issue the anti-Modernist documents that decreed the full stop of these collaborations. Pius X’s encyclical \textit{Pascendi dominici gregis} (1907), for example, formally forbade priests to follow courses at secular universities for which there was an “alternative” at a Catholic institution.\textsuperscript{218} Henceforth, priests also needed the explicit permission of their superiors when they wanted to attend a conference\textsuperscript{219} and to assume an editorship of a scientific journal. But in reality, many of the collaborations between the Catholic and the secular scientific worlds had stopped well before 1907. Since the final years of Leo XIII’s pontificate, “Modernist”\textsuperscript{220} priests had become increasingly cautious. The history of the \textit{Revue d’Histoire et de Littérature Religieuses} testifies to the growing anxiety among ecclesiastics to collaborate on the journal. From previous scholarship we know that its anonymous director, Paul Lejay,\textsuperscript{221} was having more and more trouble to find ecclesiastical collaborators and strategically asked non-ecclesiastics like Franz Cumont for contributions of a more “technical” character in order

\textsuperscript{217} Loisy’s actions were the subject of much attention in the contemporary press, and there was wide speculation over his submission. Houtin and Sartiaux, \textit{Alfred Loisy}, 119–120.

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Pascendi dominici gregis}, §49, URL: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html.

\textsuperscript{219} \textit{Pascendi dominici gregis}, §54: “At Congresses of this kind, which can only be held after permission in writing has been obtained in due time and for each case, it shall not be lawful for priests of other dioceses to take part without the written permission of their Ordinary.”


\textsuperscript{221} On the role of Lejay in the \textit{RHLR}, Lannoy, “‘Envoyez-nous votre taurobole.’”
to divert the attention of the Curia from the articles of ecclesiastical collaborators.²²²

Yet another example of the forced divide between Catholic scholars of religion and their non-Catholic colleagues is the absence of Catholic priests from the first international Congrès d’histoire des religions which was held in Paris in 1900.²²³ On January 20th, 1899 Jean Réville, who was the secretary of the conference,²²⁴ wrote a letter to Loisy in which he expressed his regret over the fact that Loisy followed the decision of the Rector of the Institut catholique in Toulouse, Pierre Batiffol, to decline the invitation to form part of the organizing committee of the Congrès.

Paris-Auteuil
4, Villa de la Réunion
20 janvier 1899

Monsieur,
J’ai le vif regret de vous annoncer que M. l’abbé Batiffol, recteur de l’Institut Catholique de Toulouse, ne croit pas pouvoir faire partie du Comité d’organisation du Congrès international d’histoire des religions en 1900. Ce qui double mon regret et celui de mes collègues, c’est que d’après la conversation que j’ai eu l’honneur d’avoir avec vous, le refus de M. Batiffol entraîne aussi le vôtre. Je vous serais bien obligé néanmoins de me confirmer encore vos intentions définitives. Je n’abandonne pas encore l’espoir que vous consentiez à faire partie du Comité.

Sur le terrain tout scientifique où nous nous sommes placés je ne vois pas quelles raisons de conscience pourraient retenir des membres du clergé catholique de s’associer à notre entreprise. Je serais désolé qu’ils s’abstiennent systématiquement. Maintenant que le Congrès est décidé et s’annonce déjà comme devant réussir, il me semble qu’il y aurait tout intérêt à ce que les savants appartenant au clergé ne s’en excluent pas eux-mêmes.

Je garde donc l’espoir qu’il y en aura qui seront disposés à entrer dans notre Comité et que ceux-là mêmes qui ne croiraient pas pouvoir s’associer à l’organisation du Congrès, y prendront part néanmoins comme adhérents, soit en présentant quelque rapport scientifique, soit en prenant part aux délibérations.

[...]
Veuillez agréer, Monsieur, l’expression de mes sentiments distingués et dévoués,
Jean Réville²²⁵

²²² On Lejay’s correspondence to Franz Cumont, see Lannoy, “Envoyez-nous votre taurobole’,” 13–15.
²²⁴ His father Albert Réville was the president. The congress was entirely organized by the Fifth Section of the EPHE: Actes du premier congrès international d’histoire des religions (Paris: Leroux, 1901) (in two volumes), i–ii.
²²⁵ Jean Réville to Loisy, January 20, 1899, BnF, NAF 15661, fº 69–70.
Clearly, Jean Réville had great trouble imagining the difficult situation of the Catholic clergy, when he asked what “conscientious objections” Catholic priests could possibly have against the purely scientific meeting that was the Congrès d’histoire des religions. Unable to grasp the full consequences of the hostile climate in which Catholics like Loisy worked, the Liberal-Protestant leaders of the Fifth Section stared at their Catholic-ecclesiastic colleagues across a gulf of complete incomprehension. In the end, neither the list of the conference committee members, nor the list of the conference participants included the names of Loisy, or of any other French priest. In a similar vein, the fear for the anti-scientific intransigency of the ecclesiastic authorities also put a stop to all intra-Catholic discussions about the modernization of Catholic science. The year 1900 marked the end of the Congrès scientifiques internationaux des catholiques, with the last meeting being held in Munich in that same year. Louis Duchesne, who was going to organize the new meeting (in Rome nota bene), decided that a new conference was no longer desirable.

After the condemnation of his work in December 1903, Loisy first formulated two half-hearted submissions which were instantly rejected by Rome. Finally, on February 28, 1904 he wrote a letter to Pius X in which he affirmed: “Je veux vivre et mourir dans la communion de l’Église Catholique.” In this letter, Loisy announced that he would resign from the École pratique and refrain from publishing the results of his ongoing research, for the “pacification des esprits.” This argument of “appeasing the minds” was also the reason mentioned in Loisy’s letter of resignation to the director of the Fifth Section, Albert Réville, on March 27, 1904.

It is quite interesting to compare these pieces of information with a letter Maurice Vernes wrote to Loisy in November 1907. This letter is a reply to a lost letter in which Loisy had clearly rebuked Vernes for having inadequately said that his former resignation for the sake of peace (“la paix des esprits”) was an act of weakness (“défaillance”). After reading Loisy’s letter, Vernes withdrew this negative evaluation. His letter also explained how his former judgment had been the result of his deep disappointment with the departure of a collea-

226 Actes du premier congrès international, vii–xxi.
227 On the history of these five conferences (1888, 1891, 1894, 1897, 1900), which were strictly controlled by Rome, Houtin, La Question biblique, 126–130; Hill, The Politics of Modernism, 53–55; Beretta, “Les Congrès scientifiques internationaux des catholiques (1888–1900).” For their context see also supra, introduction.
228 Loisy, Mémoires, II, 367.
229 Letter quoted in Mémoires, II, 351.
230 Letter preserved at BnF, NAF 15645, f° 372, and quoted in Mémoires, II, 376.
gue whom he himself had earlier (and unsuccessfully) proposed for appointment to the chair of Sabatier in 1901.

Monsieur et cher ancien collègue,
Je me félicite d’avoir provoqué vos explications par l’emploi du mot défaillance que je retire volontiers, comme je reviens sur la façon sévère dont j’avais apprécié votre séparation d’avec nous.


Votre retraite se produisait sans explication—car, dans la courte lettre qui nous fut communiquée par feu Albert Réville, vous visiez, si j’ai bonne mémoire, deux points: 1° votre crainte de ne pas trouver chez nous les conditions assurées d’un enseignement calme comme il convient à la sentence, 2° votre désir de contribuer à la paix des esprits—avait [sic] provoqué chez la plupart une pénible surprise, mais chez moi, tout spécialement, un sentiment de déception et la sensation d’une défection.

Vos explications modifient mon appréciation de l’époque et je m’empresse de vous le dire.

Quant à la situation présente du groupe de savants en tête duquel vous marchez, je la compare soit à celle des réformateurs du 16e siècle dans leur première phase, soit à celle des protestants libéraux (de 1850 à 1865); ni les uns ni les autres n’ont réalisé ce qu’ils se proposaient de faire et, néanmoins, les uns comme les autres ont abouti en une réelle mesure et ont changé l’orientation courante.

[...]
Maurice Vernes
PS Il va sans dire que je tiendrai toute communication pour strictement personnelle.

Aside from the interesting parallel Vernes drew between the Catholic Modernists and the (Liberal) Protestants (it is very doubtful whether Loisy agreed on this point), this letter shows that Loisy’s final submission to the Catholic Church and his corresponding resignation met with wide disappointment from those scholars who had been supporting Loisy’s integration into the Fifth Section. Vernes (and Albert Réville²³¹) believed that Loisy had given up his position because he was threatened with excommunication. Vernes’s letter makes us won-

²³¹ Compare with the interview with Albert Réville, published in Le Temps of April 6th, 1904, in which Réville also drew a parallel with Protestant ancestors: “Que l’abbé Loisy ait capitulé devant une excommunication, je ne peux pas m’en étonner outre mesure, car, à maintes reprises, il m’a répété qu’il était très attaché à l’Église catholique. Rappelez-vous que Calvin a longtemps hésité à se séparer de Rome parce que la majesté de l’Église lui en imposait.”
der, then, what additional information Loisy gave that made him change his mind. The *Mémoires* may help us to ascertain the content of Loisy’s original letter to Vernes. Loisy here explained that his submission to the Church had everything to do with his deteriorating health at that time.²³² But the second factor, Loisy retrospectively admitted in 1931, was the earlier failure to obtain Sabatier’s chair in 1901. Not submitting to the Church, he knew, meant being excommunicated. And this excommunication could have urged the *École pratique* to offer him the permanent position which he believed he should have rightfully obtained years ago.²³³ It is quite reasonable to surmise that Loisy didn’t mention this second—and probably most important—reason in his letter to Vernes. In that case, Vernes likely wouldn’t have withdrawn his accusation so easily. Despite the fact that Loisy’s scientific views bore a much closer similarity to those of the Liberal-Protestant scholars of the *École pratique*, it seems that his grudge against this institution prevailed over his resentment toward a profoundly anti-scientific Catholic Church. This attitude was going to change drastically in 1908.

²³² Loisy, *Mémoires*, II, 347: “il m’apparut, le 27 [February, the day before he wrote his letter of submission, my comment], comme dans un éclair, que, l’excommunication intervenant, ma santé ne me permettrait pas de continuer, au milieu du bruit qui ne manquerait pas d’en résulter, mes travaux et mon enseignement.”