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# Global Intellectual History and the Dynamics of Religion\*

**Abstract:** The essay sketches a new approach in Global Intellectual History: a theory of ‘over-extended’ reference or intentionality, especially during the age of European expansion. These over-extensions took place for instance when scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth century inquired about exotic languages and religions, as they did by collecting translations of the Lord’s Prayer. What if some of these religions had no concepts for God or Holiness? If one admitted the possibility of atheistic peoples, the proof of God’s existence through a ‘consensus gentium’ was in danger. Some Lutherans therefore developed a theory of a ‘penumbra’, a half-shadow, for places where the knowledge of God was obscured, but not totally absent. In order to find traces of this darkened knowledge they turned to the interpretation of rituals. It was – with all its misinterpretations and mis-references – a sort of globalized mapping of religion.

**Keywords:** globalization, scholarship, languages, Africa, atheism, ritual, apologetics

## 1 Over-Extensions

In recent years there has been a growing chorus of voices demanding a global intellectual history. Undoubtedly intellectual history has until now been largely oblivious to the general globalizing trend within historiography. Historians of ideas might assert that ideas are in any case ‘the most migratory things in the world,’ as Arthur O. Lovejoy once expressed it (Lovejoy 1940). But such a statement is insufficient. Today’s global history will not settle for vague conceptions of how theories and concepts traveled from ancient Greece into modern Europe, and then from Europe to America. Rather this kind of history poses discomforting questions about the colonial ballast attached to ideas when they travel and questions about ideas traveling in the opposite direction to the well-known European expansion. This kind of history is interested, for example, in how Indian and African experts participated in the scientific revolution or in the development of modern cartography. It asks about the ‘entanglements’ of East and

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West, North and South, about the idiosyncratic adaption of ideas in distant lands and the contact zones in which different ideas collided with each other.<sup>1</sup>

Where does religion find its place here? What is the relationship between global intellectual history and the dynamics of religion, which is the topic of discussion of this volume as it was of the 2015 IAHR Congress? Perhaps the question is premature because a precise conception of how intellectual entanglements are actually to be treated does not yet exist. Instead we have disparate suggestions made by, for example, Samuel Moyn or David Armitage (Moyn, Sartori 2013; Armitage 2012a; Armitage 2012b). I would like to try and stimulate the discussion by putting forward some of my own ideas for an approach to early modern globalization in terms of intellectual history and to follow this with a case study in which religion plays a decisive role.

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk emphasized a number of years ago in his book on globalization *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* that we should understand the individual of the early modern period – exposing him- or herself to the risks of ocean travel and learning new techniques – as a ‘doer of *new* deeds, an originator of *new* effects, a carrier of *new* ideas’: as someone who embodied a solid ‘liaison between subjectivity and assertiveness (*zwischen Subjektivität und Offensivität*)’ (Sloterdijk 2005, 108). My suggestion for the fundamentals of a global intellectual history goes in the same direction but focuses on a particular character trait of this subjective assertiveness.

For this assertiveness manifested itself in ‘over-extensions’ (*Überreichweiten*), as I call them. These over-extensions resulted from intentional strivings or a collective intentionality which in reaching for something were still not precise and often overshot or missed the mark.<sup>2</sup> With ‘over-extended intentionality’ I seek to describe references to the most distant objects, references which carried bundles of beliefs and intentions: one speaks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, of the riches of the Far East, of the peoples on the edge of the world, of the deluge and the early prophets, of recently discovered Amerindians and of the source of the Nile. In this regard, it is possible to see in the early modern period an age of over-extensions, as the points of reference were mostly vague, askew or completely false.

The gist of my thoughts is to understand these over-extensions spatially as well as temporally and to not overplay the difference in these aspects. I would like to mention a number of examples. Hermes Trismegistos, the Egyptian

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance Schaffer et al. 2009; Raj 2010; Schiebinger, Swan 2005; Rodgers, Raman, Reinitz 2014; Ben-Zaken 2010; Gruzinski 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, sometimes the references were also ‘under-extensions’, of course.

sage, who was seen as just as venerable as Moses, if not even older and therefore more dignified, played a large role in the intellectual discussions in Europe at this time. Many of the avant-garde philosophies of the Renaissance were inspired by the Hermetic writings. Only in the course of time did it dawn upon scholars and intellectuals that the point of reference had been placed way too far back in time. Instead of writings dating back to 1500 BCE or earlier, one was in fact dealing with writings originating in the second or third century CE (fig. 1). Similar revisions would befall other datings put forward by scholars in the early modern period (Mulsow 2002).

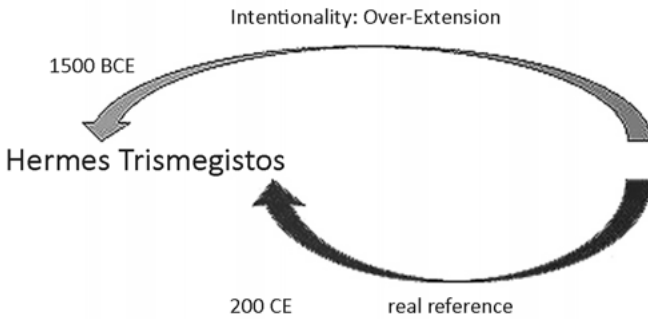


Fig. 1

These questions of time and dating were often connected to questions of space, and they were also simultaneously questions of authority. The most evident example here is Columbus' over-extension, when he thought to have reached India but in fact had discovered America (fig. 2). As the Spanish began extracting gold and silver from the mines of Potosí and other places in South America and transporting it to Europe and China, speculation circulated that this had to be the legendary land of Ophir from where King Solomon derived his wealth. One 'over'-extended the imagination both in time and space and conjured up the image of a Solomonic Atlantic fleet in order to understand the present and integrate it into the broader framework of known history. Only from our current perspective is it possible to recognize how far off base such speculation was.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gliozzi 1977; Pagden 2015, 39; Ben-Dor Benite 2009, 139. On similar topics see MacCormack 1995, 79–129.

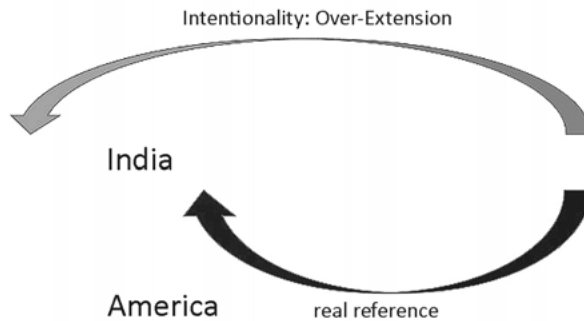


Fig. 2

When one spoke of inaccessible places, such as Ethiopia, which had briefly been visited by the Portuguese before they were expelled, then there was a tendency to project onto such places mythical notions, for example of the Prester John, who purportedly waited there with his army and upon whose support one could call in an alliance directed at the Ottomans in current wars (Silverberg 1996).

Over-extensions are not only a question of error, projection and ignorance in the early modern period. They arise out of a different mental constitution of the world, employing different coordinates from those with which we are familiar. This is also directly relevant for the history of ideas. What is needed is a theory of the varieties of reference for the early phase of globalization.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 The impulse to reach for the exotic

How did the production of over-extensions take place? There were naturally countless mechanisms in politics, nautical science and military expansion which in a very literal sense over-extended themselves. Without knowing what the destination was and equipped with only vague myths and economic desires, early modern individuals set sail for new and unknown shores. But ‘over-extensions’ could also take the armchair as their point of departure. European scholars learnt languages which until then none of their predecessors had mastered, such as Syrian, Arabic, Coptic or Ge’ez, and from their study dens their minds penetrated the depths of time and space (fig. 3). Texts became available which

<sup>4</sup> Some thoughts on this are developed in Mulsow 2015a, 25–26; Mulsow 2015b, 47–66.

opened up new horizons and conveyed knowledge about peoples and events which until then had been fully unknown. The leading discipline in this study of language was at first Biblical philology, animated by the expectation that knowledge of near Eastern languages would help to clarify the meaning of obscure concepts and contexts in scripture or deliver corroborating evidence for early Christian rituals, as was expected from a study of Ethiopian or Armenian sources.<sup>5</sup>

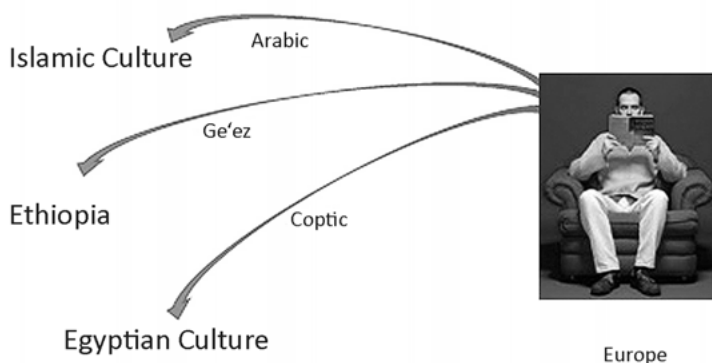


Fig. 3

Exotic religions by contrast, which had nothing to do with the Bible, were classified, as we know, as forms of idolatry.<sup>6</sup> The languages associated with them were also studied and deciphered in the course of time, but here the discipline leading the way was not Biblical exegesis, but rather apologetics. Foreign cultures were threatening cultures, and the presumption was that the Christian religion was obliged to defend itself against them by showing that these religions were only forms of a primitive idolatry which worshipped the sun or the moon, the wind or lightning, the trees, animals and spirits of nature. At the same time, this interpretation had to be careful to not overshoot the mark because this would then conflict with the *consensus gentium*, the ‘agreement among all peoples.’

This *consensus gentium* had already been developed in ancient times as a proof of God’s existence (O’Briant 1985). It declared that, in general, every tribe or nation within humanity practiced some form of divine worship. If all

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Toomer 1996; Hamilton 2006; Miller 2012; App 2010.

<sup>6</sup> See Schmidt 1990; Stroumsa 2010; Mulsow 2001; Miller 2001; Sheehan 2006; Rubiés 2006.

people believe in God, then there must be a universal idea of God, and this indicates that there really is a God. But in making such a general statement, an *advocatus diaboli* is waiting in the wings to pose the question: Are there exceptions? As soon as a general statement admits an exception, its validity is overturned. This way of proving God's existence would then collapse.

The exception, which the devil whispered into the ears of early modern intellectuals, took the following form: In some cases there are atheist peoples. And indeed the exceptions began to accumulate in the early modern period as explorers brought back to the European public more and more accounts of their encounters with exotic peoples. This marked the hour for the theologians to deploy their casuistic skills in discussing which cases and which circumstances allowed one to speak of atheism. In what follows I will reconstruct these discussions in their context of language, literacy and religion, as this area witnessed the culmination of a dynamic at play in the intellectual history of globalization: the over-extensions of armchair-Orientalists and armchair-Africanists were considerable.

Let me preface this with a warning: I will use the concepts 'Hottentot' and 'Kaffir,' which have, especially in English, strong derogatory connotations. In the early modern period they were still used as neutral names, and in this sense I will adhere to the early modern language of the sources.

### 3 The collectors of 'Our Father's

In the Franckesche Foundation in Halle there is a cabinet of scripts. In this cabinet, which was set up in the 1720s and the 1730s, scripts are displayed whose origins range from Middle-Eastern, to Indian, Russian and East Asian (Link, Müller-Bahlke 2003). They represent at the same time a monument to Babylonian confusion. The different types of writing cast their spell and tantalize the observer with the suggestion of something exotic. At the same time, the differences inspired the search for some connection between the 72 languages which gave rise to all the confusion upon replacing the original Adamic language. From the second half of the seventeenth century there was a veritable competition to discover and penetrate new languages and scripts; at some stage the number 72 was dropped as the realization set in that there were far more idioms than the number posited in the Bible. This competition was closely linked to the business of missionizing: for if one wanted to bring 'heathen' people into contact with Christianity, then it was necessary to understand their language in order to translate the Christian message into it. In the reverse direction the missionaries supplied the linguists at home with their material. Already in the fifteenth century the former

crusader Hans Schiltberger had had the idea of choosing the Lord's Prayer as the prototypical text on whose basis one could identify the different languages and test their translatability (Borst 1957–63, 1025–1026).

It would, however, take more than two hundred years for the undertaking to really gain momentum. This was thanks in part to a provost from Berlin, Andreas Müller, who had returned from London where he had worked with Brian Walton on the polyglot Bible and with Edmund Castell on a polyglot dictionary. Müller was an idiosyncratic, but ingenious linguist. He had mastered dozens of languages, among them Arabic, Syriac, Chinese and Japanese. He had promised to present the Elector of Brandenburg with a *Clavis sinica* which would enable a fast and easy acquisition of the Chinese characters, and for several years he drew a pension for this work. But he never completed it and he died embittered after burning all his notes and preliminary studies (Noack 1995; Osterkamp 2010; Kraft 1976). In a work dealing with *Alphabeta [...] diversarum linguarum* he had documented seventy different alphabets and, publishing in 1680 under the pseudonym Thomas Ludekenius, he had assembled a collection of almost one hundred 'Our Father's (Ludekenius 1680). Men like him collected versions of the Lord's Prayer like butterflies, pinning them next to each other in the vitrine according to schemes of classifications.

Müller's efforts were the catalyst for a succession of scholars who hoped to clarify the relationship of the languages among each other. Among them were Leibniz, Nicolaus Witsen, Gisbert Cuper, Adrian Reland, David Wilkens, Hiob Ludolf, Mathurin Veysseyre La Croze and John Chamberlayne (see von der Schulenburg 1973). Leibniz sent wish-lists of linguistic questions to the Jesuits in China as well as to the participants in expeditions to Siberia and South Africa, which the missionaries or explorers working in the field should attempt to answer.<sup>7</sup> He also tried to persuade Andreas Müller to publish his studies on Chinese and in this way to contribute to the development of a conceptual language. Ludolf wrote extensive annotations into his copy of Müller's book. Chamberlayne finally drew a line – even if only of a provisional nature – under the intense debate by publishing a compilation of 150 'Our Father's, often accompanied by specialist disquisitions which documented the exchange of ideas among the linguists (Chamberlayne 1715).

It was something exotic, akin to the hunt for lions and butterflies, which motivated the acquisition and – in particular – the demonstration of an acquisition of foreign languages and alphabets. If we cast a glance into the *alba amicorum* and the title pages for dissertations in the second half of the seventeenth centu-

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<sup>7</sup> See Leibniz 1982, *Desiderata*. On the genre of desiderata lists see Keller 2015; Stagl 2002.

ry, then the scholars' partiality for using foreign alphabets in an ornamental manner is immediately apparent. The mistakes that they made in this give testimony in their own way to the over-extensions of scholarship.

## 4 Language and religion

The preface to Chamberlayne's collection, written by David Wilkins, begins with the sentence: 'Under the firmament there lives no people – be it ever so blinded by the thick fog of heathenism or ever so submerged in the superstition of religion – which does not believe in the very great utility of appeals to the *Godhead* (*numen*) to the extent that they do not try to avoid the threat of an immediate or future calamity, reap the bounty of goodness and sink in humble supplication.'<sup>8</sup> This was at the same time the premise for the postulate that one could find everywhere linguistic equivalents to the Lord's Prayer. What was one to say, however, if difficulties arose in translating 'Our Father'? If the word 'god' could not be translated because the culture in question had no corresponding word in their vocabulary? We can see Leibniz grapple with this problem in the posthumously edited *Nouveaux Essais* (1,3 § 8).

Leibniz had engaged in an extensive correspondence with Nicolaus Witsen and Hiob Ludolf, and then later with La Croze, about such matters (Waterman 1979). Witsen wrote for the first time on October 16, 1697 in response to Leibniz' request for versions of the Lord's Prayer in distant languages (Peters 2010, esp. 260 ff.; Groenewald 2004): 'I take the liberty of sending you a piece in the language of the Hottentots, with the apostolic creed and the Ten Commandments, as well as a Lord's Prayer in the Mongolian language which I obtained with much trouble from a Mongolian slave who belonged to the delegation from Moscow. If they have members of other foreign peoples with them, then I will also try to obtain their versions of the Lord's Prayer. The Uzbek language is the same as Persian. That of the Kalmyks and of the Mongolians is also identical. Even if there are no Samoyedic people in the delegation, I will attempt to obtain an 'Our Father' in their language from Archangelo and I hope to send it to you in three or four months.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> David Wilkins: *Praefatio* (no pagination), in Chamberlayne 1715, *Oratio Dominica*: "Nulla sub Coelo vivit Gens vel spissa paganismi caligine occoecata, vel ludicris religionum superstitionibus immersa, quae non maximam precum utilitatem credens, ad Numen suum, ut malum imminens vel futurum averruncet, et quaevis bona in se derivet, supplex devolvatur."

<sup>9</sup> Extracts of Witsen's letters to Leibniz have been edited in Leibniz 1717, here: 361.



Witsen gained access to the Hottentots as a member of the Dutch East India Company, as the Dutch had bases at the Cape of Good Hope. The so-called Hottentots were the Khoi or Khoikoi, a network of closely interrelated peoples in South Africa and Namibia.<sup>10</sup> Much effort was expended in drawing some kind of connection between what one knew of their culture and the little which was otherwise known about Africa. On this basis, Simon de La Loubère, a diplomat returning from Siam, believed to discern in the names Asdrubal and Bocchus the echo of ancient rulers and commanders from Carthage and Mauritania (de la Loubère 1691, 141–142; cf. Smithies 1999). He also thought that he could recognize a belief in a good and an evil principle: in other words, some form of Manichaeism. In this regard the Hottentots did not seem to him to be devoid of all religion, even if all their expressions were rooted in the senses. Witsen used a question mark in transliterating the click consonant of the Khoi.<sup>11</sup> And he – or his informant in Africa – pointed to the exact problem which Leibniz would later recall: instead of ‘holy’ the Hottentots would use the word ‘happy,’ and the Holy Spirit therefore had to be formulated as ‘den gelukkige adem of windeke,’ the ‘happy breath or breeze’.<sup>12</sup>

## 5 The ‘Kaffirs’

Things were even more difficult in the case of the so-called Kaffirs (Lanni 2003; Kropf 1889). This was mostly the denotation for the Xhosa people in South Africa. Yet the word could also refer to more than just the Xhosa people. It was derived from the Arabic كافر (Kāfir) where it means infidel, or non-Muslim or at least someone who does not subscribe to one of the monotheistic religions. When the Portuguese on their journeys to India sailed around the coast of Africa, they adopted this term, which was wide-spread on the east coast, and elevated it to an ethnological term without linking it to a specific people; only as a result of

**10** See Fauvelle-Aymar 2002; on the Khoikoi see Elphick 1977; Johnson 2012; Nutz 2009; Lounay 2002.

**11** Leibniz 1717, 375–376: ‘Het Onse Vader in Hottentots’: ‘*Cita bô, t? homme ingá t’siha, t? sa di kamink ouna, hem kouqueent see, dani hinqa t’sa inhee K? chou ki, quiquo t? homm’ ingá, maa cita heci cita kôua sequa bree, k? hom cita, cita hiahinghee quiquo cita k? hom, cita dóua kôuna, tire cita k? choá t? aauthummá – k’hamta cita hi aquei hee k? dou auna, –t? aats kouqueetta, hique t? aats diaha, hique occisa ha, nauwi.*’ It follows the comment: ‘*Staat te letten, dat de Hottentotten voor’t woord heylig, gelukkig (quasi beatum) gebruyken, en voor’ Koningryke, ‘t geen by haar onbekend is, heerschappye, en verders sodanig als by ieder woord, by hen niet gebruykelyk, geannotteert staat.*’

**12** Leibniz 1717, 382 (‘Symbolum Apostolicum in Lingua Hottentotica’).

a subsequent contraction of the term's application did the South African Xhosa come to be called Kaffirs.

In the intentional striving for distant lands it was not always easy for the armchair-Orientalists to avoid confusion. When Hiob Ludolf received news from his source of information on Ethiopia, Abba Gorgoryos (cf. Smidt 2006), that there were godless people in Africa, Ludolf's mind began to generate associations with barbaric peoples 'without God, without King and law' (*sine Deo, sine Rege & lege*), nomadic, 'wild, naked,' with deformed lips. Ludolf was reminded of the Troglodytes about which he had read in the ancient Latin author Pliny: 'They dug caves which they used as houses, [...] they have no voice and only hiss.'

Ludolf continued: 'The Portuguese have the custom of calling these people *cafros*,' in other words: infidels. With this Ludolf was referring to not only the Xhosa, but also the coast-dwellers on the Red Sea and those African coast-dwellers who spoke Swahili, just as Pliny had already referred to those living on the coast and not in the inner highlands. But Gorgoryos had already named another concept in Ge'ez: ሻንቅላ (*shanjella*), which means something like 'negro' in a pejorative sense.<sup>13</sup> The Ethiopians did not refer to the coast-dwellers but rather to the people of inner Africa, in the West and Southwest of the highlands (Freeman, Pankhurst 2003). It is possible to see this on the maps (fig. 4) which Ludolf drew with the help of his African friend.<sup>14</sup>

We have arrived at a point at which we can use the over-extensions of early modern scholars to do something which always seems necessary to me in the context of a global, entangled history of ideas: namely to leave the narrative which until now informed the story of European-initiated contact with distant people, and to thus subvert and deconstruct this narrative. For until now our own narrative was a reconstruction of the globalizing endeavors of European travelers and linguists. Now we have the chance to leave this perspective and to pose different

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**13** Ludolf 1681, lib. I, cap. 14, §§ 51 ff.: 'Adhaec dantur barbari populi plurimi, sine Deo, sine Rege & lege, in arenosis atque desertis locis palantes: moribus linguisque diversi: nullas certas sedes, nisi quas nox cogit, habentes: feri: nudi, sima quoque nare et turgidis labris deformes: agriophagi: imo pamphagi: dracones enim, elephantos et quidquid occurrit, mandunt, sordissimi ac vilissimi mortalium: .... : Gregorius vocavit; eosque mihi, ut Plinius Troglodytas, descripsit. Nam specus excavant, quae illis domus sunt, victus serpentum carnes, stridorque non vox. Lusitani id genus hominum Cafros vocare solent, vocabulo ab Arabibus mutuato, qui Cafir, in plurali Cafiruna infideles seu incredulos vocant omnes eos, qui unum Deum negant.' See Plinius 1741, lib. V, cap. VIII (vol. I, 252). On the concept, see Smidt 2010.

**14** Ludolf: Map of Ethiopia, Senckenberg University Library, Frankfurt, Ms. Ff. Ludolf II 32 Fasc. E No. 3 Frankfurt. Ludolf corrected old maps of Ethiopia with the oral information given by Gorgoryos. The manuscript map was later printed in the *Historia aethiopica*.



Fig. 4

questions (fig. 5): What perceptions did the Africans have of each other? How did, for instance, the Ethiopians see the Bantu tribes? How far did this perception extend? Did it extend the full 4000 kilometers to the Kaffirs who are today called Xhosa? One can stretch this question in the dimension of time when one takes into account that the Khoisan people, to whom the Hottentots belonged, sometime between 3000 and 1000 years BCE already inhabited an area stretching into what is today Kenya, in other words close to Ethiopia. Meanwhile the Bantu, to whom the Xhosa belonged, expanded their territory southwards (Diamond 1997, 376–401; Ehret, Posnansky 1982). Such considerations are located on a far more fundamental level than the perspectives adopted by a history of ideas, but they give contours to the ethnological frame of reference with which we are concerned. Educated highland Ethiopians often still believe today that the old Ethiopia had knowledge of extended areas of Africa, which was certainly not the case. Even some southern regions which today belong to Ethiopia were unknown or only known from obscure rumors.<sup>15</sup> The perception does not always correspond to reality.

But the perception conditioned and gave contours to this reality just like the Biblical pre-conceptions, which even left their impression on the cartography. For example, because the Bible tells of one of the four rivers of Paradise, Gihon, ‘flowing around’ the land of Kush (Gen 2:10–14), and because since Flavius Josephus at the end of the first century CE the Gihon had been equated with the Nile (Scafi 2006), the maps produced by Ludolf with Gorgoryos’ help display

15 I am grateful to Wolbert Smidt for this information.

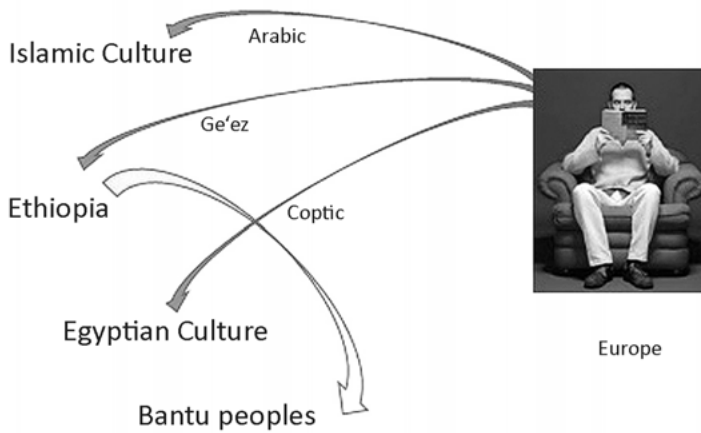


Fig. 5

the upper course of the Nile in the shape of a ring, even if the geographical reality looks totally different.

The European scholars extracted the word ‘infidel’ or ‘unbeliever’ out of the word Kaffir and were then anxious about the validity of their *consensus gentium*. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the ranks of these problematic peoples were joined by numerous others who Jakob Friedrich Reimmann assiduously listed in his *Historia universalis atheismi*: the Tupinamba Indians in Brazil, for example, who were regarded as cannibals, or numerous tribes of Canadian Indians (Reimmann 1725; on the Tupinamba, see Ginzburg 2012; Mahlke 2005). To the scholars, these were cultures in which the worship of some kind of idols was absent; instead there was simply a vacuum as far as religion was concerned. Nevertheless, the desire to investigate their languages remained. There was still a curiosity about how an ‘Our Father’ would sound in their languages, if they were to pray it.

## 6 *Consensus gentium*

Leibniz was loath to enter into the *question de fait* about whether there were atheistic peoples (Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais*, against Fabricius 1682). But there was no shortage of scholars who insisted on dealing with the factual question of the *consensus gentium*. In this regard it is worth noting how Socinians (the antitrinitarian Christians) and Remonstrants (liberal Calvinists) were open to acknowledging exceptions to the *consensus*. This may have to do with the way

these streams of Christianity rejected a natural theology and recognized only divine revelation. For this reason they were receptive to travel reports which came to Europe from America, Africa, India or North Asia. They were joined by sceptics such as Pierre Bayle who in his *Pensees diverses* and especially in the latter's *Continuation* of 1704 enjoyed quoting travel reports in order to develop *ad absurdum* the argument of the consensus. Not only were there numerous exceptions, but the premise upon which the consensus-argument rested, namely that the beliefs of all peoples were true, tended to bestow upon all forms of magic and superstition the dignity of truth. In addition to this, one could see, according to Bayle, that the atheist peoples lived peacefully among themselves and alongside their neighbors and that they were not therefore moral monsters (Bayle 1704, vol. 3, §85). In this regard the Hottentots were also mentioned, as was then later the case in Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* [s.v.].

Bayle was not alone in the fun he had with this topic. Attacking the *consensus gentium* became a point of pride in particular for the authors of clandestine manuscripts (Schröder 1998, 203–208). Thus, the *Symbolum sapientiae*, a skeptical-atheist text produced sometime around 1690 in Germany declared: 'There are numerous peoples, numerous nations, which do not possess a bean of knowledge about God, for example the Kaffirs on the Cape of Africa' (Canziani, Schröder, Socas 2000, 237–238).

## 7 Light and shadow

The confessional dynamic in Europe, the battle between Catholics and Calvinists, Lutherans and Socinians fueled the globalization of knowledge and encouraged the interpretations, along with their over-extensions, to reach into the most distant villages of Amerindians. How did the orthodox theologians react to this situation? They had to preserve the *consensus gentium* and therefore they had to find some way to respond to the reports of exceptions (Barth 1971, 172–197). Some Lutherans tried to argue using the gradations implied by the metaphors of God's light and its diffusion: the light of the knowledge of the true God might have been weakened as it spread from the point of origin in the revelation given to the Hebrews. The result was that it was only dimly present in the deeper shades in which those in more distant parts of the globe lived. And yet – so the implication of this alternative model – the light in all its refractions remains present even in the deepest shadows. This is the line of argument adopted by those who did without natural theology and rather presumed a theory of diffusion as the light of revelation spread out from its origin. This was empirically more sophisticated, but it also aroused the special interest of those interested

in the affinities and the transmission of religions – in other words, the precursors to today’s study of religion. At this point the circle closes – we began with the fascination among scholars for exotic languages and scripts and have arrived at these proto-practitioners of a study of religion who – almost by force of logic – ended up developing an interest in exotic languages.

Among such linguistic acrobats numbered also Christian Hoffmann and Johann Ernst Gerhard in Jena. As a young man, Gerhard, the son of the famous theologian Johann Gerhard, undertook a journey for purposes of education to Holland and France, and a glance inside his *album amicorum* reveals the role foreign alphabets played in this experience.<sup>16</sup> In 1667, Hoffmann, with the active support of Gerhard, wrote an interesting book addressing issues in the history of religions: *Umbra in luce, sive consensus et dissensus religionum profanarum, Judaismi, Samaritanismi, Muhammedismi, Gingis-Chanismi, atque paganismi*.<sup>17</sup> The title page of this work presented – in keeping with the aforementioned cabinet in Halle – an exotic script, namely the Samaritan words *tlal benur* for ‘shadow in light.’

Hoffmann’s book is remarkable because it represents one of the earliest attempts to present all religions of the world. Within this frame Hoffmann attempted to replace the stark opposition of atheist and religious cultures with a complex interlocking of *consensus* and *dissensus*: for the religions of the world might display numerous differences to Christianity, but in essence they also possessed some similarities. For this reason the talk was not of light and shadow, but rather shadow in the light. ‘Shadow is the privation of light (*luminis*),’ according to Hoffmann, ‘but not in every respect.’ ‘The impenetrability of the body lying in-between,’ Hoffmann continued, ‘refuses to let the shining rays pass, but to the sides it disperses the rays that fall upon it. From this the sheen (*candor*) gives a weakened filial representation (*degenerem filiam*) – or the wayward daughter – in the middle.’<sup>18</sup> What is Hoffmann trying to say with this unusual model taken from optics?

It is obvious that Hoffmann is thinking of the phenomena of solar and lunar eclipses in which the light, in a manner of speaking, reaches around the intermediate body and weakly illuminates the area within what one calls the ‘penumbra’ (fig. 6). This area is to be distinguished from the umbra shadow or complete

<sup>16</sup> In private possession. I am preparing an article on it.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard, Hoffmann 1667. On the general discourse in which this book has to be situated, see Loop 2013; Stroumsa 2010.

<sup>18</sup> *Umbra in luce*, fol. B3r: ‘*Umbra privatio est Luminis; sed non omnimoda. Tenebrarum hoc Laudemium. Corporis interpositi opacitas nitentibus radiis transitum pernegat, ad latera tamen circumcirca tangents disjicit. Inde in medio sibi opposita degenerem filiam candor effigiat.*’

shadow which no rays of light are able to reach. Rather than the unrelieved darkness of a barren atheism there is an indirect illumination from God manifested in the varied forms of the tribute paid to him. This is the penumbra. Hoffmann goes on to say: 'In particular there is a crucial difference in the shadows. The dividing line separating the one from the other remains unexplored.'<sup>19</sup> A footnote points to 'the remarks made by Doctor Weigel on Pliny,' either an unpublished manuscript or notes taken in the lectures of Erhard Weigel, the colleague of Hoffmann and Gerhard in Jena. Among other things, Weigel was a specialist in optics and astronomy and in 1654 he undertook to map for the first time a solar eclipse and its trajectory upon the earth (Weigel 1654; Schielicke et al. 1999) (fig. 7). The circles mark in this manner the penumbra shadow of the moon while the axis which links the center of the circles marks the '*via umbrae lunae*' – the path of the total solar eclipse.

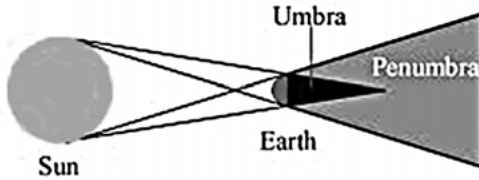


Fig. 6

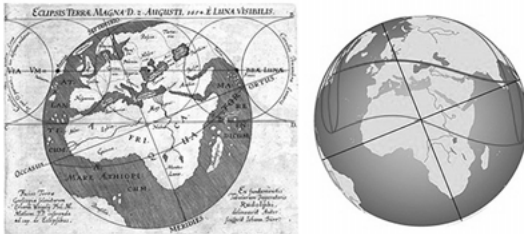


Fig. 7

19 *Umbra in luce*, fol. B3r: '*Magna insuper umbrarum varietas. Terminus alius alio imperceptor.*'

## 8 In the penumbra of globalization

In an analogy to this map one can understand Hoffmann and Gerhard's book as a cartography of the penumbra cast by the 'true religion' upon the whole earth. Is there a better metaphor for the globalization of religious studies? The connection of subjectivity and assertiveness in the form of daring over-extensions in scholarship (fig. 8)? We will see to what degree these over-extensions generated characteristic mistakes and projections. Rather than complete atheism, in Hoffmann and Gerhard's book the 'wayward daughters' of the Jewish-Christian revelation are detailed, with all their strange alphabets, languages and rituals. Hoffmann traces the slow degeneration of the revelation, beginning with the Samaritans who reject the Mosaic law and mix the Hebrew traditions with the cults of their ancestors to create a syncretism. For this reason the exotic Samaritan script adorns the title page and serves there as an emblem of the merger of light and shadow (*Umbra in luce, Antifixa*, §7).

In this undertaking Hoffmann did not ignore the problematic regions of his religious map, that is, those regions of the world which lay far from the light. And in this context they once more make their appearance: the Hottentots. They appear under the lemma of the '*deus triunus*' among the possible exceptions to those that had knowledge of this God. There, we read: 'Admittedly the power of natural judgment is so great, even among barbarian cultures, that they recognize against their will a higher nature which is to be worshipped in the highest. After they have conquered their enemies, they turn their eyes towards heaven. That He who guides and directs everything has His seat there, is something they silently acknowledge. Some call the Hottentots who live on the Cape of Good Hope wild animals. And Mandelslo claims that they recognize neither God nor the devil. Nevertheless they congregate at dusk, take each other's hands, perform songs and dances and raise their voices to heaven. In order to praise the creator of heaven and earth, in whom those who were asked said they believed, they made this noise.'<sup>20</sup>

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**20** *Umbra in luce, De Deo triuno*, § 4: '*Sane tanta vis est naturalis iudicatorii, apud Barbarissimos etiam, ut superiorem aliquam naturam, maximeque venerabilem vel invite agnoscant. Adversis pressi oculos ad coelam attollebant. Moderatorem sc. Omnium ibi sedem fixisse, taciti subinuebant. Bestias dicas Nationem Hottendot, / quae Caput Bonae Spei occupat. Neque DEUM neque Diabolum nosse, Mandelslo asserit. Sub diluculum tamen conveniunt, minibus se invicem apprehendunt, choreas agitant, sonoque meleagridum gocitantium aemulo clamorem oelo tollunt. Causam ceremoniae vel Davus conjecerit. Creatorem Coeli et Terrae, in quem se credere ipsi interrogati confitentur, ululate isto celebrare forte satagunt.*' On Mandelslo see Lanni 2003.



What is Hoffmann doing here? He suggests an implicit form of belief at work even among the allegedly atheist peoples such as the Hottentots by interpreting their rituals as an unstated worship of the divine. He draws upon the travel report provided by Johann Jakob Saar – with its repeated observations of exotic people’s behaviors and routines – to provide counter-evidence to the reports which were typically submitted, with their rather bald statements and conclusions.<sup>21</sup> Hoffmann goes beyond the statements and looks at the rituals to defend his thesis of the ‘penumbra’ – the shadow which is not completely dark, but suffused with a half-light – in the discussion about atheism. The need to hold fast to the *consensus gentium* gives rise to a different form of religious studies, one which also integrates behavior and rituals into the scope of its inquiry.

Furthermore, Hoffmann does not just take into account rituals, but also objects. Gerhard had shown him his collection of cultic artefacts which he had assembled partly as a result of connections with the Dutch East India Company. These objects, such as an Indonesian Kris-handle or shadow puppets, were inter-

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21 Saar 1672, 157 – 158: *‘Diese Heyden werden gemenet Hottendot, fast Ummenschen [...]. Man kann nicht wissen / was Ihre Religion sey: aber frühe / wann es Tag will werden / so kommen Sie zusamm / und halten einander bey den Händen / und tanzten / und schreyen auf Ihrer Sprach gegen den Himmel hinauf / daraus zu præsumiren / daß Sie doch von Gott einige Wissenschaft haben müssen / wie Sie dann einsmahls Selbst gesagt / als man nach Ihren Glauben fragte: Sie glauben an den / der alles erschaffen habe / Himmel / Erden / Meer / und alles / was auf Erden sey.’* Saar remarks in a footnote: *‘Es sagte zwar Herr von Mandelslo / und Jürgen Andersen / II. cc. Sie wissen weder von Gott / noch dem Teufel / fürchten Sich auch für nichts / als allein für Ihre grausame und schädliche Nachbaurn / die grossen Löwen / so allhier in grosser Anzahl sind / vor deren Einfall machen Sie des Nachts grosse Feuer um Ihre Läger herum. Es saget aber doch / neben dem seel. Reisenden / auch Herport / pag. 14. also: Ihre Religion oder Gottesdienst richten Sie nach der Sonnen / und den Mond / welche Sie verehren / und anbeten. Wann der Mond voll / oder neu / ist / so sind Sie die gantze Nacht beyeinander an dem Ufer des Meers / machen grosse Feuer / und tanzten darum mit einem grossem Geschrey / neben Ihren vielfältigen Spielen / mit Trummeln / und andern Instrumenten. Obbemelter Dapper gehet auch dahin. Es scheint / schreibt Er / I. c. p. m. 627. daß Sie einigen Aberglauben an den aufgehenden neuen Mond haben. Dann wann dieser zu erst gesehen wird / kommen Sie gemeiniglich Hauffen-weiß zugelauffen / und bringen die gantze Nacht mit grossen Gejauchze / mit Tantzen / Springen / und Singen / zu / dabey Sie auch in die Hände klopfen / und etliche Wort hermurmeln. Bey dieser Freude haben Sie gemeiniglich einen Topf mit einem Fell steif überzogen / fast auf dieselbe Weise / wie die so genannten Rummel-Töpfe bey den Faßnacht-Spielen in Holland. Darauf schlagen Sie mit der Hand ohn Unterlaß. Neben diesen Spiel-Zeug haben Sie noch ein anderes / als ein Bogen gestaltet / mit einer Seite / und einer gespaltenen Feder-Spuhle / an dem einem Ende. Darauf blasen Sie / und es gibt einen Klang ohne Streichstock oder Fiderbogen / wiewohl Er nicht stark ist / ob Sie schon Ihren Athem stark genug ausblasen / und wieder einholen. Ja / man sihet auch zuweilen / daß die Frauen / und Kinder / vor aufgerichteten Steinen / niderknyen / und Sich neigen.’*

preted as dim, diluted reflections of Christian dogma, in this case the dogma relating to the devil. Such ‘things of knowledge’ are inevitably central points of orientation for a globalized history of ideas, particularly when it comes to religion, and here the over-extensions become manifest: while on Java shadow puppets generally represent nobles from the old Indian epics, Hoffmann and Gerhard’s intentional striving projected onto them the near Eastern devil.<sup>22</sup>

This makes clear the degree to which Hoffmann and Gerhard’s undertaking was a subtle attempt at rescuing the *consensus gentium*: an attempt which, contrary to their intentions, led them into entirely different fields of study and inspired all kinds of wild speculations about the spread and transmission of culture, where recourse was sought in the thought of Athanasius Kircher, who himself was no stranger to wild speculation.

## 9 Summary

Let me attempt a short summary. A global history of ideas which treats the European early modern period (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries CE) as a period of over-extensions needs to examine the motive forces which generated these over-extensions. In contrast to the standard form of global history this form of history will not focus so much on the explorers, merchants and missionaries who embarked from Europe on their journeys around the world, but rather on the armchair-travelers who as linguists and theologians remained at home while interpreting the travel reports and linguistic discoveries. In this regard we can discern apologetic motives which, fueled by confessional disputes, extended the reach of the interpretations into the huts of the most distant native tribes. The more exotic and the greater the deviation from the norm, the more interesting. A casuistry of religious ethnography arose, along with a cartography of religious deviation, with, as we have seen, Hoffmann and Gerhard borrowing from the diagrams for solar eclipses. Finally the need to explain away godlessness brought forth an attentiveness to rituals and objects and as such a new level of sophistication within the study of religion.

It was left to the French philosopher Voltaire to swap the places of highest and lowest, when he turned the condescension of the Europeans towards the Hottentots on its head. In his *Philosophie de l’histoire* he wrote in the chapter about the ‘savages’: ‘First one has to admit that the indigenous people of Canada, and the Kaffirs, which we took the liberty of calling savages, are far outdone

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<sup>22</sup> I am preparing a publication on this topic with Paola von Wyss-Giacosa, Zurich.

by our own savages [in Europe]. The Hurons, the Algonquins, the Illinois, the Kaf-firs, the Hottentots, all possess the art of completely fulfilling their own needs, which is something our own people do not understand. The tribes in America and Africa are made up of free people; our savages do not possess the first inking of a concept of freedom' (Voltaire 1963 [1756], 23; cf. Ginzburg 2001).

In the eighteenth century Voltaire managed to criticize the European situation by adopting the viewpoint of standing on the outside looking in. He was concerned with freedom in Europe and in this regard the comparison with the Hottentots was simply clever rhetoric. For us, however, Voltaire's reversal of perspective can serve to stimulate a modern entangled history: not only the European narratives count, and this qualification applies equally to the history of ideas. Rather these narratives need to be complemented by new, unusual questions, which can dock onto specific points in our story but then open up new unexplored paths. I have only been able to intimate that with regard to the Ethiopians and the Kaffirs. This is, however, the direction which our own map, re-configured by a new awareness of the globalization process, tells us we need to follow.

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