

Race and Religious Transformations in Rome

Franz Cumont and Contemporaries on the Oriental Religions¹

ABSTRACT: Contemporaries of Franz Cumont (1868–1947) often applied racial theories to the supposed cultural, spiritual and political decadence of Rome, holding Oriental immigrants and their religions responsible. In his *Oriental Religions* (1906) Cumont explicitly rejected Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Otto Seeck, arguing instead for spiritual progress in Late Antiquity, under Oriental influence. Our analysis shows certain ambiguities and stereotypes in Cumont's publications on the Orient. We also present unpublished archive material from the Academia Belgica in Rome, showing Cumont accepted, in the 1920s, racial theories (Tenney Frank). He now explained the religious transformations in Rome by a change in the population.

Keywords: Conversion – Orient and Orientalism – Race – Religion – Roman Empire – Cumont

The Concepts of Race Then and Now

There has been a remarkable shift in the ontological status of race: whereas in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries everyone was convinced the concept of race referred to a biological reality, and almost everyone believed biology formed the basis of cultural differences, the current consensus is that race is a social construct. Within the Humanities and the Social Sciences, ethnicity has replaced the concept of race to discuss cultural differences.² This new concept has been used since the end of the Second World War, most often as a replacement for the disgraced term 'race'³ and it was further developed in anthropology from the 1960s onwards. It started to find its way to the academic study of Classical Antiquity, during the 1990s and the 2000s, with applications to various cultures and civilizations of the ancient world.⁴

During the period covered by this paper, roughly the 1850s to 1920s, race was considered to be a biological fact with social and cultural implications. The modern

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2 Harding 2002, p. 219.

3 On the relationship between 'race' and 'ethnicity', see Sollors 2002.

4 See Siapkas 2014, p. 66; Hall 1997, p. 16, and McInerney 2014, pp. 1–16.

concept of “race” included external characteristics such as skin colour or the form of the skull, but also mental abilities and character. These were seen as the immutable, essential, fixed traits of a people, formed in the earliest, primordial days of a people, in its origins. The development of a hierarchy of the races reflected the contemporary international political situation, affirming the superiority of Northern and Western peoples and legitimizing imperialism.⁵ In the field of historiography race mixture and its presumed effects on cultural change became dominant themes.

In the 1820s Karl Otfried Müller (1797–1840) had published his *Geschichten Hellenischer Stämme und Städte* (1820–1824) and popularized the notion of *Stamm* (“tribe”, “ethnic group”).⁶ Martin Bernal has presented Müller as the starting point of a racist historiography of Antiquity, but Josine Blok has pointed out that Müller did not use the term race: he only wrote about “Volk”, “Nation” and “Stamm”.⁷ It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century, if not the beginning of the twentieth, that pseudoscientific racist theories truly began to find their way into the Sciences of Antiquity, before reaching, in Germany with scholars like Helmut Berve (1896–1979), Hans Friedrich Karl Günther (1891–1968), Fritz Schachermeyr (1895–1987), the status of official doctrine in 1933.⁸ As a matter of fact, in classical studies in general, the term race was never stigmatised before World War II and the devastating effects of Nazi racism. It was also present in German, Anglo-Saxon⁹ and in French language scholarship as we will see.

The Extension of the Term “Race” in the Work of Cumont

Contemporary scholars, with a post-World War II perspective, run the risk of reading anachronistic meaning into a text and its use of the word “race”. For a nuanced interpretation, we will first analyse the extension of the term in Cumont’s times and in his own work. In nineteenth century academic discourse, “race” could have many meanings. This is true for English and German, but since we are studying Cumont, we will focus here on its different meanings in French. Cumont was very conservative in the use of terms like Aryans and Semites in a racial sense.¹⁰ He did use the word

5 We have studied imperialism in the work of Cumont and some of his contemporaries in Scheerlinck, Rey and Praet 2014.

6 The original was published in Breslau in 1820, the part on the Dorians was translated as *The history and antiquities of the Doric race*. London, J. Murray, 1930.

7 Bernal 1991, pp. 308–316; Blok 1996.

8 See Berve 1943; Günther 1929 and 1935; Schachermeyr 1939.

9 Challis 2010 and 2013; Bindman 2002.

10 Cumont uses the term “Aryan” three times in *Les Religions Orientales* (Cumont 2006). Talking about the Persians and their interaction with Greek culture in comparison to other nations, he wrote, p. 215–216: “Sa culture originale resta toujours rebelle à une assimilation que subirent à des degrés divers les Aryens de Phrygie, comme les Sémites de Syrie et les Chamites d’Égypte.”; on the Magoi of Asia-Minor, compared to the earliest stages of Mazdeism, p. 226: “Ainsi, le mazdéisme, un mazdéisme un peu différent de celui de l’Avesta, resté, à certains égards, plus près du naturalisme primitif des Aryens, ...”, on p. 228: “la langue qu’employaient ou du moins qu’écrivaient les colonies iraniennes d’Asie Mineure n’était pas leur ancien idiome arien, mais un dialecte sémitique, l’araméen.” The term “Semitic” is used more than 70 times, of-

“race” frequently, although, in most cases, it should be taken in the non-biological sense of “people”, “nation”, “genius” or *Volksggeist*.¹¹ We will discuss the relevant use in the section “Racial vocabulary in Cumont’s work”, but think a systematic overview of its general use is useful here as a preliminary *caveat*. A famous French dictionary from the end of the nineteenth century such as the *Litttré* can give us a better idea of the different meanings of the term: “1. tous ceux qui viennent d’une même famille”: in examples like “La race de David, la race de Clovis” the word simply means “family”, not Jewish or Germanic race; 2. “extraction”: point or place of origin; 3. “generation” as in “de race en race”; 4. sometimes it means one’s children: “fils ou fille”; 5. “une classe d’hommes se ressemblant ou par la profession, ou par les habitudes ou par les inclinations,” as, e.g., in “la race des poètes, des philosophes, ...”; only as the sixth meaning the dictionary mentions: 6: “terme de zoologie: réunion d’individus appartenant à la même espèce, ayant une origine commune, et des caractères semblables, transmissibles par voie de génération, ou en d’autres termes variété constante dans l’espèce. En ce sens il se dit des hommes. Les populations de race germanique. La race caucasienne. La race juive.”

Franz Cumont: An Introduction

The Belgian classicist Franz Cumont (1868–1947) was the greatest specialist of his time on the cultural interaction between East and West in the Roman Empire.¹² Although he worked on many aspects of late antique culture,¹³ he is best known for his studies on the so-called Oriental Religions which were, in his view,¹⁴ mystery cults who spread from the ancient Near East to the West. In *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*¹⁵ he described the development and the spread to the West of

ten as a linguistic term, very often, in the chapter on Syria, as a synonym for Syrian as e.g. on p. 34 “En Syrie aussi, les découvertes d’inscriptions araméennes et phéniciennes, les fouilles pratiquées dans les temples ont suppléé dans une certaine mesure à l’insuffisance des renseignements fournis par la Bible ou par les auteurs grecs sur le paganisme sémitique.”; even in a context like the spread of early Christianity it does not include *Jews* but refers to the pagan mysteries of Oriental people and thus refers to Syrians, as on p. 7 “Les premières communautés chrétiennes se sont fondées, formées, développées au milieu de populations orientales, Sémites, Phrygiens, Égyptiens.”

11 Bonnet & Van Haepere 2006, p. XXXIV; Olender 2002, p. 113, p. 116 and p. 120.

12 For a detailed essay on the life and work of Franz Cumont: Bonnet 1997, pp. 1–67.

13 See the whole list of his publications by Annelies Lannoy and Danny Praet on the website <http://www.cumont.ugent.be/bibliografie>, and in Cumont 2016.

14 For more recent views on the relationship between Oriental Religions and Mystery Cults, and on the (disputed) Oriental origins of these cults, see Bonnet & Van Haepere 2006 and the contributions in Bonnet, Pirenne-Delforge & Praet 2009, *passim* and especially the introduction: pp. 5–14.

15 Franz Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (Paris: Leroux, 1906), fourth and last edition in 1929 (Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner), with several editions and translations in four languages: French (1906, 1909, 1928, 1929), English (in the United States: 1911, 1956), German (1910, 1911, 1931), Italian (1913, 1967). Cumont’s classic was reedited, with extensive introduction by Bonnet and Van Haepere 2006, as the first volume of the *Bibliotheca Cumontiana*. References will be to this 2006 edition rather than to the English translation of 1956: Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, with

mystery cults from four Oriental “nations”: from Asia Minor (mostly the cult of Atis and Cybele), Egypt (Isis and Osiris), Syria (the Baals, the Dea Syria) and Persia (Mithras). To these four analyses, he added a discussion of the success of the religious pseudo-sciences astrology and magic,¹⁶ and an analysis of how the interaction between all these religious elements and late antique philosophical systems transformed the final stage of Roman paganism in the fourth century AD.¹⁷ Cumont saw the success of the Oriental cults, not as an element in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, but as a stage in the moral and religious progress of the ancient world. Although their success implied the demise of classical Roman paganism, Cumont saw the victory of the Oriental Religions, more so than the spread of Judaism,¹⁸ as the main motor in the religious and – as he emphasized – moral transformation of the Roman Empire which ended in the triumph of Christianity. Cumont was mostly positive about this transformation and about “his” oriental religions, but his work is not without ambiguities or inconsistencies. We will study the way he both introduced and distanced himself from the application of racial theories to the history of Late Antiquity. This article will also try to demonstrate how Cumont’s view on late antique history is impregnated by different contemporary concepts of race – even, on occasion, by a more or less biological approach to this great transformation. And we will compare his views with more negative analyses of the influence of Oriental religions in Late Antiquity.

Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau and the Oriental Religions

The “*Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines*” (1853–1855) by Joseph Arthur comte de Gobineau (1816–1882)¹⁹ was one of the most influential sources for a racial approach to history. Although the portion of Cumont’s private library preserved in the Academia Belgica in Rome, only contains Gobineau’s *Les religions et les philosophies de l’Asie centrale*,²⁰ Cumont will have been familiar with – at least – the general argument of the

an Introductory Essay by Grant Showerman, New York, Dover Publications, 1956 (reprint of the 1911 translation by Showerman).

- 16 Cumont 2006 stressed that astrology in Late Antiquity had the reputation of being “le plus précieux de tous les arts et comme la reine des sciences”, p. 254; nuanced on p. 264: “en réalité non pas une science, mais une foi”; and p. 281 on magic: “comme l’astrologie la magie est donc à certains égards une science.” See also Cumont in a letter to the Collège de France published by Sarah Rey 2010, p. 24: “l’astrologie et la magie: sont des sciences mais aussi des religions.”

- 17 On this final synthesis, see Bonnet 2011.

- 18 The title of Cumont’s book clearly and deliberately limits his discussion to paganism in the Roman Empire, as he explains in the “Préface”, pp. 6–12. Likewise, the spread and influence of Judaism are not discussed in any detail, although, for Cumont, Judaism was influential in the evolution of Asia Minor cults. See Stroumsa 2009, p. 94 and Praet 2013.

- 19 We refer to the edition in La Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (1983–1987), with “notices, notes et variantes”: pp. 1175–1471.

- 20 Available in the Cumont collection of the Academia Belgica: shelf number C.01.12.079. It discusses the contemporary religious situation of Central Asia: Islam, Zoroastrianism, ... and includes a history of Buddhism with a translation of the Babi *Book of Precepts*, which is perhaps why Cumont donated it. The *Essai* was and is of course present in the Ghent University Library in the posthumous fourth and fifth editions.

Essai. Therefore, our discussion will start here. The opening sentence of *Les religions et les philosophies de l'Asie centrale* clearly shows Gobineau did not simply despise the Orient: "Tout ce que nous pensons et toutes les manières de penser ont leur origine en Asie."²¹ He explained both the rise and the decline of civilizations as the result of race mixture between the Aryans and other races. All the great civilizations had known an Aryan input. The positive or negative result of such mixtures, and the decline and fall of these civilizations, depended upon the ratio of the Aryan versus the non-Aryan components. For Gobineau race-mixture was not negative *per se*: "Le génie artistique, également étranger aux trois grands types, n'a surgi qu'à la suite de l'hymen des blancs avec les nègres." The essay limited Western Civilization *stricto sensu* to the Germanic peoples (Book VI) and discussed Greek and Roman culture under the heading: "La civilisation européenne sémitisée." In Gobineau's view, the Hellenistic era intensified an interaction between East and West that had existed from the Archaic age onwards, but the preponderance of the Oriental element in the Hellenistic mixture tended towards racial and cultural degeneration.

The creation of the Roman Empire broadened the Mediterranean mixture of races. Gobineau famously spoke of a "Semitic Rome" for the late Republican and Imperial periods.²² After the conquest of Southern Italy and of Sicily, (semitized) Greeks and then also Carthaginians influenced the racial mix. With the expansion of Roman rule to the East, Oriental immigrants fundamentally changed the population of Italy and the culture of Rome. In this context Gobineau mentioned several of the cults to which Franz Cumont would dedicate most of his career, the so-called "Oriental religions", as imports which in fact documented the lack of creative energy of the native Italians, who were now supplanted by Orientals and by their cultural habits, including their gods.²³

Des emprunts à l'hellénisme, et quoi de plus? Rien, pas même les dieux nouveaux, les Isis, les Sérapis, les Astarté, et, plus tard, les Mithra et les Élagabal que Rome vit s'impatroniser dans ses temples, il ne percevait de tous côtés que ce sentiment d'une population asiatique transplantée, apportant dans le pays qui s'imposait à elle les usages, les idées, les préjugés, les opinions, les tendances, les superstitions, les meubles, les ustensiles, les vêtements, les coiffures, les bijoux, les aliments, les boissons, les livres, les tableaux, les statues, en un mot, toute l'existence de la patrie.

Gobineau mentioned the popular Persian god Mithras together with the Egyptian Isis and Serapis, and the Syrian Astarte and Elagabal, brushing them all with the same "Oriental" paint. Gobineau used cultural stereotypes about the Orientals as people who are artistically talented and refined in daily life, but also morally unreliable and unable to sustain any prolonged efforts. These stereotypes go back to Antiquity, were

21 Gobineau 1900, p. 405; see also p. 1086 note 2.

22 Gobineau 1855. This was the title of Chapter 7 in Book V: pp. 877–932. See also the "tableau" of the ten great civilizations he discussed, Book I, Chapter 16, p. 347: "IV. Les Grecs étaient issus de la même souche ariane, et ce furent des éléments sémitiques qui la modifièrent. [V. La Chine] VI. L'ancienne civilisation de la péninsule italique, d'où sortit la culture romaine, fut une marqueterie de Celtes, d'Ibères, d'Ariens et de Sémites."

23 Gobineau 1855, V, 7, p. 880.

repeated by many modern authors,²⁴ and we will show that they can be found in the writings of Cumont. Gobineau explains that, by calling the Roman Imperial period Semitic, he does not mean the population was completely supplanted by Semites but that a new fusion came into being which, by analogy, could be called Semitic. This mixture proved talented for the arts and for intellectual life in general, but not for what the count called “a solid and serious civilization.” Although the race-mixture would eventually lead to the demise of Rome, Gobineau did not propose a blind racism,²⁵ and he was certainly not blind to the merits of individuals, as is shown by his list of good emperors, including “le grand Septime Sévère.”²⁶

The Oriental Religions and the Transformation of the Roman Empire

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, scholars started to interpret the so-called decline and fall of the Roman Empire by exploring ecological and biological factors.²⁷ While some historians focused on climate change or mass epidemics, racial theories became the most popular of the biological causes put forth.²⁸ Racial theories applied to history study the development and interaction of biologically defined groups of people, who have certain characteristics, both physical (the shape of the skull, the colour of the skin or the hair, facial characteristics) and mental (intelligence, mentality, temperament), which are hereditary and can as such be influenced by selective breeding and cross-breeding. Ancient historians could thus attribute perceived cultural changes in the Empire to changes in its population: the race mixture caused by the infusion of immigrant blood in Rome during the Empire was seen as the cause of a barbarization of the Roman stock. While some scholars deemed the northern, Germanic barbarians responsible for the racial and cultural decline, Oriental immigrants, more specifically the Syrians, mostly took the blame for the degeneration of the population. This current of thought was present in European historiography of the late nineteenth century, both French (next to Gobineau, one can mention Georges Vacher de Lapouge, Le Bon, among others) and German (von Hellwald, Nissen).²⁹ It can also be found in American scholarship of the beginning of the twentieth century, with, e.g., Madison Grant³⁰ and Tenney Frank, whose ideas are discussed further on. Nazi-ideologists would later use many of these scholarly works for their own purposes.³¹

24 See Weiler 2004 and 2004a.

25 See the notice by Jean Boissel in the Pléiade edition, or Banton 1998, p. 62 on Gobineau: “His influence has often been exaggerated and his outlook misrepresented.”

26 Gobineau 1855, V, 7, p. 911: For the list of emperors: p. 150.

27 See Demandt 1984, pp. 347–396: “Naturwissenschaftliche Erklärungen: Erschöpfte Lebensgrundlagen.”

28 Demandt 1984, pp. 368–393 for a chronological overview: “Rassenentartung.”

29 Demandt 1984, pp. 372–3.

30 Grant 1916.

31 The anti-semitism present in Stuart Houston Chamberlain's work (cf. *infra*) is not inherent to racial theory, and was first introduced to it by Eugen Dühring in his 1881 essay, which was many times republished, under slightly different titles such as *Frage des Rassencharakters und seiner Schädlichkeiten für Existenz und*

Franz Cumont explicitly took a stance towards racial theories regarding the religious evolution of the Roman Empire in *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*.³² In the second chapter (“Pourquoi les cultes orientaux se sont propagés”) he analysed the success of those cults which in his view completely destroyed the Roman state religion.³³ With military metaphors of invasion and battle, he described the oriental religions as competitors, superior in three ways: emotional, intellectual and moral. The “oriental religions”, with their exotic rituals and their suffering gods, satisfied the senses and the sentiments to a far greater extent than classic Roman state religion. The appeal to the intellect was greater because of the alliance with the ancient sciences (or pseudo-sciences as one would now say) of astrology and magic. And conscience came into play because, in his view, the Oriental religions established a new and convincing link between a moral life during our earthly lives and blessings in the afterlife.³⁴ The intellectual and moral causes of their success unquestionably paint a positive picture of the Oriental religions. Whether, in Cumont’s mind, the sensual and sentimental reasons for their spread were equally positive is less clear, or at least more ambiguous.

He described the Oriental Religions as more attractive than the “cold” Roman state religion because of their exoticism (e.g. the unusual clothing of the priests, the music, the impressive rituals),³⁵ and also because they established an emotional link between the adherents and the deities of the Oriental Religions, whose myths often involved human emotions such as grief and joy. But it should be stressed that, while the first “sensual” cause of their success could have been used to depict the spread of the Oriental religions in terms of the decadence of the stern old Roman civic virtues, Cumont did not choose a blatantly “Orientalist” path. He clearly rejected, from a visceral and a moral point of view, certain aspects of these cults, such as the bloody ritual of the taurobolium,³⁶ the castration of the *galli*, the ritual prostitution in certain Syrian cults, and so on. And one could easily compile an anthology of very negative terms from Cumont’s pages: about the cult of Cybele, e.g., he used on a single page terms as “savagery”, “barbarous”, “cruel”, “obscene”, “coarseness”, “primitive”, “disgusting”,

Kultur der Völker. See also Joseph Vogt’s 1935 and 1936 articles for the broad public. Alfred Rosenberg’s views are discussed by Losemann 1999.

32 See on the genesis of the book: Rey 2010.

33 See Cumont 2006, p. 26 and p. 35: “*L’invasion des cultes orientaux, qui détruisit l’ancien idéal religieux et national des Romains*”: (emphasis added).

34 Cumont 2006, p. 45.

35 Cumont 2006, p. 298, where he made this comparison: “Représentons-nous une grande confusion de toutes les races du monde, où des mollahs arabes, des lettrés chinois, des bonzes japonais, des lamas tibétains, des pandits hindous prêcheraient à la fois le fatalisme et la prédestination, le culte des ancêtres et le dévouement au souverain divinisé, le pessimisme et la délivrance par l’anéantissement, où tous ces prêtres élèveraient dans nos cités des temples d’une architecture exotique et y célébreraient leurs rites disparates; ce rêve, que l’avenir réalisera peut-être, nous offrirait une image assez exacte de l’incohérence religieuse où se débattait l’ancien monde avant Constantin.”

36 Cumont’s views on the taurobolium are no longer shared by contemporary research, see Praet 2013.

“shocking and licentious.”³⁷ But such a list, as Cumont himself stressed, would be a superficial interpretation of the Oriental Religions, and it would also be a superficial reading of Cumont’s book on those religions. He had an evolutionist conception of the religious history of the Roman Empire and was convinced that even the most primitive aspects of the Oriental Religions underwent an internal evolution which raised them to a (higher) moral and spiritual meaning. Cumont combined his view on the internal evolution of these cults with the conviction that the Oriental Religions also had an external effect, so to speak, on the general evolution of religion in Late Antiquity. And, although the Oriental Religions caused the downfall of traditional paganism, this was not part of a general decline but actually a step forward in the moral and religious development of the West, indeed of mankind in general.³⁸

Criticism of Stuart Houston Chamberlain

Cumont briefly discussed contemporary scholars who apply the laws of the natural sciences to religious phenomena.³⁹

D’autres historiens ou penseurs préfèrent aujourd’hui appliquer aux phénomènes religieux les lois des sciences naturelles, et les théories sur la variation des espèces trouvent ici une application imprévue. L’immigration des Orientaux et en particulier des Syriens aurait été assez considérable, on l’a soutenu, pour provoquer une altération et une dégénérescence rapides des robustes races italiques et celtiques. Concurrément, un état social contraire à la nature, un régime politique néfaste amenaient la disparition des plus fortes énergies, l’extermination des meilleurs et l’ascension des pires éléments de la population. Cette foule abâtardie par des croisements délétères, énervée par une sélection à rebours, devient incapable de s’opposer à l’invasion des chimères et des aberrations de l’Asie. L’abaissement du niveau intellectuel, l’oblitération de l’esprit critique accompagnent la décadence des mœurs et l’affaïssement des caractères. Dans l’évolution du paganisme, le triomphe de l’Orient marque une régression vers la barbarie, un retour aux origines lointaines de la croyance, à l’adoration des forces de la nature. Voilà, résumés en deux mots, certains systèmes, récemment proposés, qui ont été accueillis avec quelque faveur.

Cumont explicitly referred to two well-known authors. In the footnote accompanying the passage just quoted, in the first edition of *Les religions orientales* (1906), he added “La théorie de l’abâtardissement des races a été exposée notamment par Stewart

37 Cumont 2006, p. 309–310: “Sans doute, avec l’adoption des mystères orientaux se répandent des pratiques barbares, cruelles et obscènes: déguisements en animaux dans les initiations mithriaques, danses sanglantes des galles de la Grande Mère, mutilation des prêtres syriens. Le culte de la nature est primitivement aussi “amoral” que le spectacle même de la nature. Mais un spiritualisme éthéré transfigurait idéalement la grossièreté de ces coutumes primitives. Comme la doctrine est tout imprégnée de philosophie et d’érudition, la liturgie est toute pénétrée de préoccupations éthiques. Le taurobole, douche répugnante de sang tiède, est devenu un moyen d’obtenir une renaissance éternelle.”

38 See Praet 2012.

39 Cumont 2006, p. 42–43.

Chamberlain, *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 3^e éd. Munich, 1901, p. 296 ss. – L'idée d'une sélection à rebours de l'*Ausrottung der Besten*, a été défendue, comme on sait, par M. Seeck, *Geschichte des Untergangs der antiken Welt*, qui esquisse ses conséquences religieuses, t. II (1901), p. 344. Son système ne sera développé que dans le troisième volume qui n'a pas paru.⁴⁰ For both Stuart Houston Chamberlain (1855–1927) and for Otto Seeck (1850–1921) Cumont used editions from 1901.⁴¹

It is safe to say that Chamberlain did not see the common market of religions established by the Pax Romana as a positive evolution.⁴² He attributed a detrimental role to the Semites in the degeneration of the Italian race and Roman society. Although he made an exception for Jews influenced by the Law, Semites in general were defined as the diametrical opposites of the idealised Germanic peoples who, as Aryans, were related to the ancient Persians.⁴³ But the cult of Mithras did not receive a more positive treatment than any other mystery cult.⁴⁴ For Chamberlain, the degenerate

40 Cumont, *Les religions orientales*, first edition (Paris: Ernest Leroux), p. 259–260, end-note 4. The second edition of 1909 (also with Leroux), p. 321–322 has the same end-note (now number six). The third edition of 1929 (with Leroux) did not contain this note since this edition had reduced the notes to a few references to primary sources. In the fourth edition, also of 1929 but with Paul Geuthner (= Cumont 2006), the note number has moved up to 11, p. 214–215; the reference to Seeck is still the same, but now without the referral to the unpublished volume. Cumont added “cf. Rostovtzeff, *Economic History*, p. 485.” Naturally the text on Tenney Frank which is quoted and discussed *infra* was also added. The new edition in the Bibliotheca Cumontiana has footnotes: note 11, p. 43. Mikhail Rostovtzeff, in the last chapter of his 1926 book reviewed several contemporary theories on the “decay” of the empire. He also summarized Seeck's and Frank's ideas but disagreed with both of them. Against Seeck he argued, firstly, that not only the best elements of society are exterminated during wars and revolutions and secondly, that in the history of a civilization a period of bloom can succeed a period of war. With regards to Frank, Rostovtzeff rejected the idea of the inferiority of the Semitic and Oriental races as compared to Greeks and Romans, as the Orient had created great civilizations well before the latter entered the world-stage.

41 Chamberlain 1903; Seeck 2000. The Cumont Archives do not contain a copy of Chamberlain, and the third edition is not (or no longer) present in the Ghent University library. It is perhaps historically interesting to note that the two copies present in the Ghent University Library are the 26th and the 27th edition of *Die Grundlagen* printed in 1940 and 1941 respectively. The Academia Belgica still holds the second volume of Seeck, Berlin, Siemenroth, 1901, 619 pp. under shelf-number C.11.04.032b.

42 Chamberlain 1903, pp. 547–548: “Noch niemals erlebte die Welt einen derartigen religiösen Taumel, wie er sich dazumal von den Ufern des Euphrats bis nach Rom fortpflanzte. Indischer Mysticismus, der unter allerhand Entstellungen bis nach Kleinasien eingedrungen war, chaldäische Sternenerverehrung, zoroastriischer Ormuzddienst und die Feueranbetung der Magier, ägyptische Askese und Unsterblichkeitslehre, syrisch-phönizischer Orgiasmus und Sakramentswahngedanke, samothrakische, eleusinische und allerhand andere hellenische Mysterien, wunderbar verlarvte Auswüchse pythagoreischer, empedokleischer und platonischer Metaphysik, mosaische Propaganda, stoische Sittenlehre – das alles kreiste und schwirrte durcheinander. Was Religion ist, wussten die Menschen nicht mehr.”

43 Chamberlain 1903, I, p. 371.

44 Chamberlain 1903, p.636–7: “Dagegen hatte sich bis gegen Ende des 2. Jahrhunderts unserer Ära ein durchaus konkreter, wenn auch mystisch gefärbter Materialismus wie eine Pest durch das ganze Römische Reich verbreitet. Dass dieses plötzliche Aufblühen alter Superstitionen von Semiten ausging, von denjenigen Semiten nämlich, die nicht unter dem wohlthätigen Gesetze Jahve's standen, ist erwiesen; hatten doch die jüdischen Propheten selber Mühe genug gehabt, den immer von Neuem auftauchenden Glauben an die magische Wirkung genossenen Opferfleisches zu unterdrücken; und gerade dieser unter den geborenen Materialisten weitverbreitete Glaube war es, der jetzt wie ein Lauffeuer durch alle Länder des stark semitisirten Völkerchaos flog. Ewiges Leben verlangten diese elenden Menschen, die wohl empfinden mochten, wie wenig Ewigkeit ihr eigenes Dasein umfasste. Ewiges Leben versprochen Ihnen die Priester der neu umgestalteten Mysterien. So schreibt z. B. Apuleius über seine Einweihung in die

race-mixture of the Roman Empire caused its decline and fall. To him the success of the Oriental mystery cults represented a return to prehistoric systems of belief: the “konkreter, wenn auch mystisch gefärbter Materialismus” of, e. g., the cults of Isis and Mithras was seen as a return to Totemism and compared to a pest that spread through the whole Roman Empire. Only the racially pure, “unmixed” northern peoples had retained their natural superiority: “Kein Zweifel! das Rassen- und nationalitätslose Völkerchaos des spätrömischen Imperiums bedeutete einen unheilvollen, Verderbnis bringenden Zustand, eine Versündigung gegen die Natur. Nur ein Lichtstrahl glänzte über jene entartete Welt. Er kam aus dem Norden. Ex septentrione Lux!”⁴⁵

Cumont partially agreed with the pessimism, but he clearly disagreed about the role played by the Oriental Religions. First, he painted a gloomy picture of the mental state of the late Empire, using well-placed metaphors of society as an organism and the Oriental Religions as a contagious disease:

On ne saurait le nier, dans la décadence romaine, les âmes semblent être devenues plus épaisses et les mœurs plus grossières; cette société, dans son ensemble, manque déplorablement d’imagination, d’esprit et de goût. Elle paraît atteinte d’une sorte d’anémie cérébrale et frappée d’une incurable sénilité, où la raison, affaiblie, accepte, avec les superstitions les plus absurdes, l’ascétisme le plus exalté, la théurgie la plus extravagante. Elle ressemble à un organisme incapable de se défendre contre la contagion.⁴⁶

However, Cumont would not subscribe to this diagnosis without nuances.⁴⁷ He had started off his *Religions Orientales* with criticism of popular prejudice against the contemporary Orient: “Il est difficile de s’abstraire complètement du présent et pénible de renoncer à des prétentions aristocratiques. Nous avons peine à croire que l’Orient n’a pas toujours été réduit en quelque mesure à l’état d’abaissement dont il se relève lentement, et nous attribuons volontiers aux anciens habitants de Smyrne, de Béryste ou d’Alexandrie les défauts qu’on reproche aux Levantins d’aujourd’hui.”⁴⁸ He argued instead for the superiority of the Ancient Near East over Imperial Rome, and this in many different fields: “l’industrie et la richesse, l’habileté technique et la productivité artistique, l’intelligence, enfin, et la science.”⁴⁹ In the very first chapter of *Les religions orientales*, he developed the idea that the religious evolution which constitutes the subject of his book was part of a more general evolution, which he described as “une lente substitution de la culture asiatique à celle de l’Italie.” He depicts the almost omnipresent influence of the Orient on the Occident, discussing political

Isismysterien, er dürfe das Verborgene nicht verraten, nur so viel könne er sagen: er sei bis an die Grenzen des Todesreiches gelangt, habe die Schwelle der Proserpina betreten, und sei von dort ‘in allen Elementen neugeboren’ zurückgekehrt. Auch die Mysten des Mithraskultus hiessen ‘in aeternam renati’, auf ewig Wiedergeborene.

45 Chamberlain 1903, p. 313.

46 Cumont 2006, p. 43.

47 Cumont 2006, p. 43–44.

48 Cumont 2006, p. 17.

49 Cumont 2006, p. 18.

institutions, law, science, literature, art (with particular emphasis on architecture) and industry.⁵⁰ Although it becomes clear from Cumont's exposé that this Oriental superiority is not absolute,⁵¹ he does show his awareness of traditional Western biases regarding the Orient and his disapproval of them on several occasions. He even accuses the famous Orientalist Ernest Renan (1823–1892), by whom he was otherwise greatly influenced, of harbouring old prejudices towards the Orient.⁵² In the same way, according to Cumont, the racial theorists Chamberlain and Seeck depart from a Western prejudice about Eastern inferiority. We will now take a closer look at how Seeck racialized late antique history and how he assessed the “oriental religions”.

Otto Seeck: “Ausrottung der Besten” and the Rise of the Orientals

Cumont was in contact with Otto Seeck (1850–1921) since 1888. The Cumont-archives in Rome contain a postcard written by Seeck to thank the young Belgian scholar for sending him an offprint of *Les dieux éternels des inscriptions latines*.⁵³

In his “Geschichte des Untergangs der Antiken Welt” Seeck famously applied a reversed social Darwinism to the history of the later Roman Empire. In his interpretation, Roman blood was weakened by the elimination of the best elements of the race in wars of conquest and in civil wars. Furthermore, the Roman élite of the late Republican and the Imperial period chose not to procreate, and the measures taken by Augustus did not prevent the end of numerous noble bloodlines in Rome. As a consequence their superior qualities were not handed down through the generations and the quality of the Italian population degenerated. The religious life of the declining Empire was characterized by a reversion (Rückschlag) to prehistoric times, whose rudimentary elements developed a new vigour. This return to primitivism was not, however, inherently, racially linked to oriental influence.⁵⁴ In general, Seeck's appraisal of the Semitic blood is not as depreciatory as Cumont's judgement seems to insinuate.⁵⁵ In fact, on several occasions, Seeck asserted the liveliness and the strength of the Semitic stock: “Die Semiten haben am längsten einen Teil ihrer geistigen Frische bewahrt; doch soweit sie zum Reiche gehörten, sind endlich auch sie in das allgemeine

50 Cumont 2006, pp. 17–27.

51 In law and military matters the Romans take pride of place over the Orientals; cf. Cumont 2006, p. 21 and 18 respectively.

52 Cumont 2006, p. 17. Cf. Praet 2014.

53 Published in *Revue Archéologique*, 1888 (11), pp. 184–193. This postcard (dated June 8, 1888, ref. nr. 1919) is however the only item of correspondence between the two scholars preserved in the archives. On the postcard and the relation between Cumont and Seeck, see Bonnet 2005, vol. I, pp. 102–103.

54 Seeck 2000, II, p. 344.

55 Cf. Rebenich 2000, p. XIII–XIV for a nuanced assessment of Seeck, compared to other racial theorists: “Andere Stereotypen, die oft mit sozialdarwinistischen Ueberzeugungen einhergingen, machte er sich allerdings nicht zu eigen. So enthielt er sich des obsessiven Germanenkultes, war nicht allzusehr beeinflusst von antisemitischen Klischees (Vgl. Bd. I, S. 298–300), sah in der Rassenmischung einen Vorteil (Bd. I, S. 323, 327f.) und erteilte grundsätzlich rassistischen Kategorien, wie sie die damalige Anthropologie entwickelte, eine deutliche Absage (vgl. Bd. I, S. 540–550).”

Verderben mit hineingezogen.”⁵⁶ Seeck was also not negative about race mixture (Rassenkreuzung) as such: with numerous parallels from zoology he argued that the result can be an improvement (Veredlung) but all depends on the genetic material used in the mixture.⁵⁷ He attributed the deleterious effect of Syrian immigration on Roman blood to an unnatural form of selection, not to an inherent inferiority of all Syrians. The Roman slave system caused the Syrians best suited for (domestic) slavery – so in fact the inferior elements of the stock – to be taken to the West where they were eventually freed and where they influenced both the demography and the culture in a negative way: “Es wäre also nicht das schlechteste Blut gewesen, das durch den Sklavenhandel in die Adern aller Provinzen eingeführt wurde, wenn nicht die falsche Auslese es verdorben hätte.”⁵⁸ These Syrian slaves and freedmen were responsible for the injection of slavish qualities in a population that was already weakened by the non-survival of the fittest, and this resulted in the general spirit of passivity which, according to Seeck, pervaded the last centuries of the Roman Empire.⁵⁹ This atmosphere of weakness and slavishness in Rome is an important factor in Seeck’s interpretation of the success of the Oriental Religions. He elaborated on this subject in the third volume of the *Geschichte des Untergangs* which appeared after the first edition of *Les religions orientales*. Here Seeck repeatedly used Cumont as a source (both *Les religions orientales* and *Textes et Monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithra*).⁶⁰ He fitted the spread and success of the Oriental Religions into his interpretative scheme: he argued that, e.g., the emphasis put on purification was perfectly suited for the weakness and despondency of the period. Individuals had given up to try and conquer their own vices; instead they were looking for salvation and turned to passive purification.⁶¹ In the reading presented by us, however, Cumont saw the teachings of the Oriental Religions on the afterlife as a stimulus for a moral life in this world, not as a cause or an effect of world-flight.

Seeck also explained the spread of the Oriental Religions within the higher ranks of society by means of his reversed social Darwinism. He described how the Oriental cults had been brought to Rome by slaves and merchants from the East, and then argued that the individuals who spread the cults in Rome – their „Apostles“ – were freedmen, prostitutes, pirates, slaves and simple soldiers, in other words, the spiritually and intellectually inferior elements of society. As a result of the extermination of the best elements among the higher, educated ranks, the elite slowly sank down towards the inferior religious levels where formerly only their slaves could be found.

56 Seeck 2000, I, p. 298, cf. also p. 272.

57 Seeck 2000, I, p. 323 and p. 548–551.

58 Seeck 2000, I, p. 328.

59 Seeck 2000, I, p. 328–329: “Die Eigenschaften, die das späteste Altertum vor allen andern charakterisieren und endlich den Sturz des Römerreiches herbeiführten, waren Unselbständigkeit, Feigheit und Servilismus, mit einem Worte Sklavensinn.”

60 Cumont 1896.

61 Seeck 2000, III, p. 134: “Mit der schlaffen Mutlosigkeit, die dieser schwächlichen Zeit gemäß war, fügte man sich in die unvermeidliche Bosheit der menschlichen Natur und strebte nicht mehr, sie zu überwinden, sondern nur noch, sich davon zu entschümen.”

The combination of an upward social mobility and the degeneration of the traditional élite caused a general decline in the cultural life of the Roman Empire, including its religious life.⁶² This interpretation is quite different from what can be found in Cumont's work, where the oriental religions represent a step forward in the religious, moral and spiritual evolution of the Roman Empire. "Si le triomphe des cultes orientaux prend parfois les apparences d'un réveil de la sauvagerie, en réalité, dans l'évolution des formes religieuses, ces cultes représentent un type plus avancé que les anciennes dévotions nationales."⁶³

Cumont professed to disagree with the views of the racial theorists we just discussed. But, as we will presently examine, he also expressed ideas which were very similar to Chamberlain's and Seeck's.

Racial Vocabulary in Cumont's Work

In *Les religions orientales* the word "race" is used 23 times. As was common in his time, Cumont used the term without embarrassment: even without properly defining it, but clearly in very different meanings. He used it in the first sense of "family", e.g., when he talked about the Attalids of Pergamon: "Ceux-ci le [Dionysos-Sabazios] regardaient comme l'auteur de leur race, et son culte, à la fois public et secret, était étroitement uni à celui des souverains divinisés."⁶⁴ In the context of the custom of virgins who have to be deflowered by strangers from another tribe or clan, he used "race" in the meaning of "clan": "Ce n'est qu'après avoir été déflorées, qu'elles peuvent épouser un homme de leur race", which follows a citation from Salomon Reinach's *Cultes, mythes et Religions*: "La première union sexuelle, impliquant une effusion de sang, a été interdite, lorsque ce sang était celui d'une fille du clan versé par le fait d'un homme du clan."⁶⁵

Most of the times, he used the word "race" in a cultural, linguistic context, e.g., when talking of the Syrian nation: "Le syriaque, fils de l'araméen qui avait été sous les Achéménides la langue internationale de l'Asie antérieure, redevient avec Bardesane d'Édesse celle d'une race cultivée."⁶⁶ It is also used in an "ethnic" sense, in the tradition

62 Seeck 2000, III, p. 135: "Die orientalischen Kulte dagegen drängten sich aus der Tiefe des Volkes empor: die Ausrottung der Besten machte sich auch darin geltend, dass nicht mehr diejenigen die religiöse Führung behaupteten, denen sie nach ihrer reiferen Bildung zukam, sondern dass die niedrigen und geistig armen ihren Aberglauben den höheren Schichten aufzwangen. Oder richtiger, diese selbst sanken immer mehr herab und traten so allmählich auf die niedere Glaubensstufe ihrer Knechte zurück."

63 Cumont 2006, p. 44. On the social dynamics of the evolution of religious thought in *Lux Perpetua* (1949), another classic by Cumont, see Lannoy 2010.

64 Cumont 2006, p. 317 (Cumont added this part of the book, the appendix on the cult of Bacchus in Rome, in 1929 (fourth edition) and as such it does not feature in Showermans translation of 1911). Compare with what he wrote about the wife of the emperor Septimius Severus, the Syrian "Julia Domna, qui appartenait à la race sacerdotale d'Émèse" in his 1917, p. 1050; republished in Cumont 2015, pp. 161–198, here p. 156.

65 Cumont 2006, p. 184, n. 58, Salomon Reinach, *Cultes, Mythes et Religions*, vol. 1, Paris, Leroux, 1922³, p. 79.

66 Cumont 2006, p. 22 and p. 39: "Au contraire, aujourd'hui encore, en Orient, les églises séparées de l'orthodoxie grecque emploient une variété d'idiomes qui rappelle la diversité profonde des races soumises

of ancient ethnographic thought, which ascribed to each people its own *nomoi*, its climate, its genius.⁶⁷ In Antiquity it is difficult to talk, as Benjamin Isaac has done, about “the invention of racism” or rather of “proto-racism,”⁶⁸ because it is unclear to what extent ancient theories and individuals considered the influence of climate hereditary. Cumont clearly used national or ethnic stereotypes, already present in Antiquity and repeated in modern theories about the “Volksgeist,” when he wrote about the Egyptian cults⁶⁹ or about the Syrian people: “L’esprit de lucre des Syriens était proverbial. Actifs, souples, habiles, souvent peu scrupuleux, partout ils savaient faire d’abord de petites, puis de grosses affaires. Profitant des aptitudes spéciales de leur race, ils parvinrent à s’établir sur toutes les côtes de la Méditerranée.”⁷⁰

Cumont also used stereotypes about the military qualities of Westerners and Easterners. The latter have been stereotyped since Antiquity as soft, feminine, and, as such, poor soldiers. Cumont tells us that Orientals are “excellent dans toutes les professions, hormis celle de soldat.” Cumont here clearly neglects the value of the Parthian army, famous for its skilled cavalry and archers, although Persia holds the highest place under the Oriental nations.⁷¹ As the homeland of Mithras, Persia is part of the religious Orient, and as such it is subject to stereotypization, but in a sense it is also (almost) occidental: Cumont described the Persian nation as the Oriental double of the Romans. They were equally disciplined and organized: capable of administering a world empire, even more so than the Greeks. The Greeks also have a liminal status between East and West in Cumont’s book. It has always puzzled scholars why he added a chapter on Bacchic Mysteries in the fourth edition of *Les Religions Orientales*.⁷² We can not further discuss these ambiguities here, but they prove that neither “Orient” nor “Occident” were clearly defined concepts for Cumont.

In the following quote, “race” quite simply means people (Cumont uses “peuples-rois” as a synonym for “races”), but the content of the positive comparison between the Romans and the Persians might have had an implicit Indo-European motive.⁷³

Race de conquérants, ils furent, comme les Romains, soumis à une forte discipline, et ils sentirent, comme eux, sa nécessité pour l’administration d’un vaste empire. Il existait entre les

autrefois à Rome.” See also p. 190 on the “races congénères” living on both sides of the Roman-Parthian border in the plains of Mesopotamia.

67 Cumont 2006, p. 262, with further references in note 26: “Enfin, les qualités physiques et morales des races ne sont-elles pas manifestement déterminées par le climat sous lequel elles vivent?”

68 See Isaac 2004, “Introduction,” p. 15–39.

69 Cumont 2006, p. 112 on Serapis: “Ils voulaient que ce dieu réunît dans une commune adoration les deux races qui peuplaient leur royaume et contribuât ainsi à leur fusion. Les Grecs devaient le servir à côté des indigènes.”

70 Cumont 2006, p. 164.

71 This is not exceptional. Cf. Hentsch 1988, p. 21: many scholars in the nineteenth century considered “l’Iran [...] comme un morceau d’Europe en Asie”.

72 Bonnet & Van Haepelen 2006, pp. XLII–XLIII with further references in note 212.

73 Persian belongs to the Indo-European language family, which was often considered superior to others. On the other hand, Armenian is also an Indo-European language, long considered a branch of Iranian, and although its great value and importance was proven by Antoine Meillet (1866–1936) in his 1903 book, Cumont called it a “barbarian speech” (transl. 1977: 2099, p. 22: “leur parler barbare”).

deux peuples-rois des affinités qui les rapprochèrent par-dessus le monde grec. Le mazdéisme apporta une satisfaction longtemps attendue au vieux sentiment latin qui voulait que la religion eût une efficacité pratique, imposât des règles de conduite aux individus et contribuât au bien de l'État. En y introduisant la morale impérative de l'Iran, Mithra infusa au paganisme d'Occident une vigueur nouvelle.⁷⁴

On two occasions, Cumont also talks of “race mixture” (“mélange des races”): the first time when he describes the influx of Oriental immigrants and gods,⁷⁵ the second time, at the very end of his book, when he describes the final stages of paganism: “Toutefois, peut-on parler d’une religion païenne? Le mélange des races n’avait-il pas eu pour résultat de multiplier la variété des dissidences?” Although the expression was included in the index of the new edition of *Les religions orientales*, it might give the false impression that Cumont himself used it in a biological sense, but he is talking of people and cultures, not of biological races in the modern sense of the word. The same goes for the reference to the (failed) marriage-policy of Alexander the Great after which Greeks and Persians returned to the “instinctive hostility between their races.”⁷⁶ On the other hand it does remind the reader of the concepts of “Völkerchaos” and “Rassenmischung”. As so often in Cumont’s elegant prose, it is impossible to pinpoint what exactly he meant to say. In his writings, one can always find the fundamental ambiguity of his intellectual project. As Bonnet and Van Haepere remarked in their introduction to *Les religions orientales*: “Cumont ménage la chèvre et le chou. D’une part, il ne parvient pas à s’affranchir véritablement de la vision négative de l’Orient. Son discours se fait, à l’occasion, très dépréciatif.” Yet *supra* we have also emphasized Cumont’s very positive evaluations of the role of the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and of the role of the “oriental religions.”⁷⁷

Tenney Frank, “Race Mixture in the Roman Empire”

The analysis of an ethnical orientalisation of the top layers of the Roman population was defended by the American ancient historian Tenney Frank (1876–1939), whose article “Race Mixture in the Roman Empire” Cumont added to the footnote on ra-

74 Cumont 2006, p. 245, and p. 169: “races guerrières”. In Cumont 1896, I, p. 232, he described ancient mazdaism as “le culte d’une race, et par là même tolérant; le mithriacisme au contraire aspire à devenir une religion universelle.”

75 Cumont 2006, p. 42: “Ainsi se multipliaient nécessairement les échanges de produits, d’hommes et d’idées, et l’on pourrait soutenir que la théocrasie fut une conséquence nécessaire du mélange des races, que les dieux du Levant suivirent les grands courants commerciaux et sociaux...”

76 Cumont 2006, p. 216: “Il est significatif qu’Alexandre ait songé à associer les Perses à ses Macédoniens dans le gouvernement de son Empire : c’étaient les deux peuples de maîtres, seuls dignes de commander aux autres populations de l’Asie. Mais cette union fut bientôt brisée et les deux nations restèrent désormais séparées par une hostilité instinctive de race autant que par une opposition héréditaire d’intérêts.”

77 Bonnet-Van Haepere 2006, p. XXXIV. This material is under copyright. Any use outside of the narrow boundaries of copyright law is illegal and may be prosecuted. This applies in particular to copies, translations, microfilming as well as storage and processing in electronic systems. © Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2016

cial theories in the fourth and final edition (1929) of *Les religions orientales*.⁷⁸ Frank was a professor of Latin at Johns Hopkins University who published on a wide variety of subjects ranging from Catullus and Virgil to Roman imperialism and the social and economic history of Rome.⁷⁹ He was Annual Professor at the American School of Classical Studies in Rome in 1917–1918, and Professor in Charge in 1922–1923 and 1924–1925. The Cumont Archives in the Academia Belgica in Rome contain two letters Frank sent to Cumont: one from Baltimore (dated May 11, 1922) in which he thanked Cumont for sending him his edition of the emperor Julian, and commenting on his work on Virgil. The second letter, dated February 22, 1925 thanked Cumont for a lecture he gave at the American School and thus documents at least one encounter.⁸⁰

In his article on “Race Mixture” Frank used onomastics and argued that the large number of Greek and Oriental names documented by epigraphy, especially in funerary inscriptions, revealed racial changes in imperial times.⁸¹ In Frank’s analysis, the best elements in the Roman stock had eliminated themselves in external and civil wars, and the elite had also chosen to remain childless, whereas the slaves and the freedmen had procreated freely which had enabled them to replace the native Romans. Frank used the term “race suicide”.⁸² Although Frank expressed some doubts about the reality of racial characteristics (“if indeed racial characteristics are not wholly a myth”), he believed strongly in ethno-cultural stereotypes. He states that “The people who built Rome had given way to a different race.” Although, theoretically, a new culture could have emerged, the new orientalised population lacked the stamina and the organisational qualities needed to rule a world empire. “It is apparent that at least the political and moral qualities which counted most in the building of the Italian federation, the army organisation, the provincial administrative system of the Republic, were the qualities most needed in holding the Empire together.”⁸³ Frank also linked this demographic change to the changing religious landscape and more specifically to the success of the Oriental Religions. In this context he elaborated on the discussion between Franz Cumont, who “seems to think that these cults won many converts among all classes in the West”, and Jules Toutain (1865–1961) who was rather more sceptical

78 Frank 1910. Cumont 2006, p. 43, n. 11, cf. infra. Frank returned to the subject of demography and Oriental Religions in 1932, in the second lecture of his Martin Classical Lectures at Oberlin College, pp. 35–63, but this was published after the fourth edition of Cumont’s *Les religions orientales*.

79 For a biography and bibliography see Broughton 1990.

80 Cumont, who spent most of his time in Rome from 1912 onwards, probably met Frank on several occasions. The first letter in the Academia Belgica archives has reference number 6943 XL, the second, written on American Academy in Rome stationery: 7713. Scans are available on: <http://www.euchia.net/academiabelgica.it/acadbel/askFCnew.php>. Cumont’s lectures discussed the excavations at Doura-Europos: *AAR Annual Report* 1924–25 (call number: 176.AnnR) p. 42, from the report of the Professor in charge of the school of Classic Studies, Sept. 1, 1925, Prof. Tenney Frank.

81 Frank 1910 gives statistics on pp. 700–702. For a more recent interpretation, cf. Verboven 2012, especially pp. 89–92 “demography”. On the presence of Greek names, see Solin 1971, 2003.

82 Frank 1910, p. 704. See also p. 689: “... or did Rome become a nation of ex-slaves and their offspring?” and p. 690 (on free plebeians in the time of Juvenal and Tacitus): “... perhaps ninety per cent had Oriental blood in their veins.”

83 Frank 1910, p. 705–706 for all the quotations.
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about the global success-rate of the Oriental Religions in the West.⁸⁴ In this respect, Frank sided more with Toutain, but he proposed an ethnic explanation: in regions with a small presence of soldiers or slaves-freedmen only a relatively small number of inscriptions documented the presence of the Oriental Religions, and their success is best documented in the city of Rome and other areas where there was a large Oriental presence; so Frank concluded that ethnic factors caused these differences.

Frank accepted Cumont's characterization of the Oriental Religions as more emotional. As has been discussed, for Cumont this was a general reason for their success when they competed against the "cold" Roman state religion, but Frank linked this success to a "natural" need for this type of religions in the orientalist population: "But is not the success of the cults in great measure an expression of the religious feelings of the new people themselves? And if it is, may it not be that Occidentals who are actually of Oriental extraction, men of more emotional nature, are simply finding in these cults the satisfaction that, after long deprivation, their temperaments naturally required?"⁸⁵ The Oriental cults were not successful with the natives ("the unemotional westerner") but the population of certain regions in the West had changed dramatically: "In short, the mystery cults permeated the city, Italy, and the western provinces only to such an extent as the city and Italy and the provinces were permeated by the stock that had created those religions."⁸⁶ In the last decades of the fourth century even the aristocracy of the Western Empire had become "almost completely foreign" and the so-called "réaction païenne" against Christianity was not of genuine patrician stock. Frank concluded: "The Western invasion of the mystery cults is hardly a miraculous conversion of the even-tempered, practical-minded Indo-European to an orgiastic emotionalism, foreign to his nature. These religions came with their peoples." The final victory of Christianity is explained as a Hegelian synthesis: "it contained enough Oriental mysticism to appeal to the vast herd of Easterners in the West, and enough Hellenic sanity to captivate the rationalistic westerner."

In the fourth edition of *Les religions orientales*, which was never translated into English, Cumont added to footnote 11 of the second chapter this reference to Frank which seems to be more positive towards racial interpretations of the success of the Oriental Religions: "Tenney Frank ('Race mixture in the Roman Empire'... a montré, par des statistiques fondées sur les épitaphes, que la plèbe romaine, et en général la population italique, avait été profondément transformée par suite d'un mélange, sans cesse accru par l'esclavage, de sang oriental. Il fait observer avec raison (p. 706) que 'le succès des cultes orientaux est la manifestation des sentiments religieux d'un peuple nouveau.' Ces Occidentaux, qui sont d'extraction asiatique, trouvent dans les cultes de leur pays d'origine la satisfaction des besoins religieux de leur véritable race." The

84 Frank did not give any references in his article, but he was clearly thinking of the volumes by Toutain, *Cultes païens dans l'Empire romain* (Paris, Leroux, 3 vols., 1907–1920). On the debate between Cumont and Toutain, see Bonnet & Van Haepere 2006, p. LIX–LX and Bonnet 2009.

85 Frank 1910, p. 706.

86 Frank 1910, p. 707.

Belgian scholar did not rewrite the main text of his book for the fourth edition and he also kept the references to Chamberlain and Seeck in this footnote, but his general attitude seems to have changed, as will be documented by an unpublished lecture he gave in Copenhagen. The idea that the Oriental religions were simply more ethnically suited to a Roman-Oriental population does not tally well with the ideas, presented in the main text, of a superiority by which the oriental cults conquered all ranks of Roman society, thanks to their ability to satisfy the senses and the sentiments, the intellect and the conscience of the Western world.

The Copenhagen-Ineditum

The archives of the Academia Belgica in Rome hold an unpublished fragment of a lecture Cumont gave in Copenhagen in 1926, which clearly shows that Cumont accepted the racial analysis by Tenney Frank.

In July 1926 Cumont was invited to Denmark by Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1854–1928) of the University of Copenhagen, and by Frederik Poulsen (1876–1950), director of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, to give a number of lectures on topics of his own choice. From a draft version of Cumont's response one understands that he planned to discuss different aspects of the Roman-Syrian interaction at the University, and that he planned to present the excavations at Doura-Europos at the Glyptotek:

Je vous proposerais un sujet sur lequel je pourrais dire certaines choses nouvelles: Rome et la Syrie. Dans la première conférence je parlerais de l'œuvre accomplie par Rome en Orient Syrie et de la politique sur l'Euphrate, dominée plus par la question du commerce de l'Inde. La seconde traiterait au contraire de ce que Rome doit à la Syrie et en particulier de l'influence économ[ique] artistique religieuse des colonies syriennes d'Occident. Les deux conférences du Musée: les fouilles de Salhiyeh Doura Europos et les peintures qui y ont été découvertes – Accompagnées de projections ... Dites-moi si vous désirez que je donne aussi des projections, montrer Baalbek, Palmyre etc.]⁸⁷

The Cumont archives contain a dossier with unpublished texts and notes, including a roughly drawn up table of contents, which most probably belong to the lectures discussed in the correspondence between Cumont and Heiberg. These documents are contained in an envelope which reads, in Cumont's hand, "Colonies Syriennes".⁸⁸ One document within this dossier features what is certainly the introduction to a discussion of the subject of the second lecture: "Les Syriens dans l'Empire. Après avoir étudié *l'œuvre accomplie en Syrie par Rome*, nous voudrions montrer dans cette seconde conférence, ce que *l'empire romain a dû aux Syriens*" (our italics).⁸⁹

87 Cumont to Heiberg, 2 July 1926, Academia Belgica, Archivi Cumont, inv 8077.

88 Academia Belgica, Cumont Archives, binder 10, folder 3.

89 Academia Belgica, Cumont Archives, inv. 1792. The text continues: "C'est un chapitre d'un sujet plus vaste sur lequel on pourrait écrire tout un volume. Il faudrait remonter à la colonisation des Phéniciens et

Cumont's presentation of the two topics under discussion, put in the turns of phrase which we also find in his letter to Heiberg, makes it highly probable that this fragment, as well as the other text fragments and notes in the dossier, belong to Cumont's preparations for the second lecture he was planning to give at the University of Copenhagen. Moreover, in his letter to Heiberg Cumont referred to "nouvelles choses" he had to say about the subject. In the margins of the texts in the dossier, Cumont did refer to several publications from the year 1926, such as his own "Fouilles de Doura Europos"⁹⁰ and Mikhail Rostovtzeff's "Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire".⁹¹ The text which will be presented in the following is also part of the dossier, and pertains to Cumont's discussion of the role played by Syrian slaves in the West.⁹² In this text, he insisted again on what he saw as the accuracy of Frank's epigraphic evidence.

Ces malheureux que le hasard des enchères dispersaient aussi dans des bourgs et des domaines lointains ne pouvaient dira-t-on, rien y apporter à la culture/civilisation du pays. En dehors de leurs cultes, comme celui de la *Dea Syra*, et de leurs superstitions quels (sic) action ces humbles serviteurs prolétaires des campagnes syriennes, ont-ils pu exercer?

Cette action a été immense par leur nombre même. Ces esclaves ont modifié peu à peu la race italique et remplacé l'ancienne population par une autre. On pourrait rester sceptique si l'on n'avait que le témoignage des écrivains. Quand p. ex., Tacite⁹³ nous dit que du temps de Néron un grand nombre de sénateurs et de chevaliers étaient des descendants d'esclaves et que la lignée indigène s'était amoindrie dans une proportion surprenante, on pourrait voir là l'expression de l'indignation d'un aristocrate de vieille souche contre les parvenus. Mais Tenney Frank a étudié à ce point de vue les nombreuses inscriptions de la ville de Rome et la statistique qu'il dresse aboutit à ce résultat // -tat que 70 % des personnes nées à Rome portent un cognomen grec qui montre qu'ils sont d'origine orientale. La proportion d'émigrants libres venus de l'extérieur pour exercer dans la grande ville leur talent ou leur métier est minime. La grande masse de la population d'origine exotique est formée de descendants d'esclaves, dont un affranchissement a fait des citoyens. La plus grande partie de ces esclaves n'étaient point des captifs ils venaient de l'Orient et spécialement de la Syrie et de l'Asie Mineure, ou l'élève (sic) du bétail humain était pratiqué avec profit.

En dehors de Rome, la proportion de cette population d'origine servile et orientale est moindre mais elle reste très forte, elle oscille suivant les contrées aux environs de 60 %. Et il faut se rappeler que la plupart des esclaves ruraux étaient brûlés sans *cere* // *me* (sic: = cérémonie?) et ne

des Carthaginois, qu'en un certain sens la Diaspora juive et l'émigration syrienne prolongent et montrer ce que aux diverses époques l'Occident a dû à l'Orient. Mais nous ne pouvons considérer ici qu'un épisode de ce grand mouvement, similaire aux diverses périodes (sic) de l'histoire, en nous limitant à l'Empire romain, ou plutôt en commençant à l'Empire car nous verrons que l'action de la Syrie sur les provinces occidentales s'est prolongée quand celle de Rome sur la Syrie avait cessé."

90 Cumont 1926.

91 Rostovtzeff 1926.

92 Academia Belgica, Cumont Archives inv. 1793, 4-7.

93 See Frank p. 689; Tacitus, *Annales* 13, 27. This material is under copyright. Any use outside the narrow boundaries of copyright law is illegal and may be prosecuted. This applies in particular to copies, translations, microfilming as well as storage and processing in electronic systems.

nous ont pas laissé d'épithaphe. Dans ce vaste creuset où s'étaient fondues les diverses races de l'empire, le [mét] alliage syrien et asiatique tendait de plus en plus à augmenter.

Au commencement de l'empire les guerres et un long service militaire enlevaient les plus robustes des Italiens. La faible natalité provenant d'une limitation volontaire du nombre des enfants amenèrent (sic) au véritable suicide de la race.

Les familles dont on peut suivre la destinée s'éteignent avec une rapidité surprenante. Elles étaient remplacées (sic) par les fils ou les petits-fils de ces syriens et de ces asiates plus prolifiques que la traite avait amenés en Italie. La disparition de la vieille race romaine était un fait accompli des (sic) l'époque des Antonins. Si l'on compare les Italiens d'aujourd'hui aux romains d'autrefois on peut dire qu'ils ont ni leurs qualités ni leurs défauts: d'un côté une robuste race de paysans tenace persévérante sérieuse morale, douée d'un grand sens politique et pratique. Mais médiocrement douée au point de vue intellectuel et dénué (sic) de tout sens/presque dénué de sens artistique. De l'autre un peuple d'une d'une (sic) // vive intelligence, supérieurement doué pour les arts, mais nerveux impressionnable versatile et d'une moralité politique parfois douteuse. Forte proportion de sang sémitique s'y est mêlé (sic) à travers les vicissitudes de l'histoire - a créé le terrain sur lequel on (sic) grandit l'art et la religion orientale.

Inspired by Frank's article Cumont stressed both the influx of Syrian blood and the so-called suicide of the Italic race, caused by the high mortality of its most robust specimens in the wars of that period and the low birth rate amongst the Roman elite. He used the same terms as Frank ("suicide de la race", "disparition de la vieille race romaine") and accepted the transformation of the Roman population through the influx of Orientals, particularly slaves and freedmen, and their numerous offspring. From the comparison between the qualities and the flaws of ancient Romans and of modern Italians it becomes clear that Cumont accepted both the thesis of mixture of races in Antiquity and the hereditary nature of racial or ethnic characteristics, inherited by modern Italians from ancient Orientals. However, we should perhaps not underestimate the humorous impact of stereotypical jokes told about Mediterranean people by a blue-eyed Northerner to other blue-eyed Northerners.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Cumont saw the role played by the Oriental Religions in the general development of morality and spirituality in the later Roman Empire as positive. He did not interpret them either as a symptom or a cause of a general decline. Since Gobineau the Semitic influence on the racial mix of the Roman Empire was seen as both positive and negative. There was a certain ambiguity in the way Cumont wrote about the Orient, es-

94 Cf. the description by Lameere 1948, p. 147: "Des cheveux blancs, imperceptiblement dorés (il ne fut jamais chauve), une barbe de même nuance, encadrant un visage osseux, au teint frais et rose. ... Un grand nez busqué entre des yeux bleus, plutôt petits, et profondément enfoncés sous les sourcils. ... Parfois, dans la couleur bleue des prunelles, comme un éclair métallique."

pecially when he explained the success of the Oriental Religions by their sensual and emotional appeal. This ambiguity is also present in the Copenhagen ineditum: however stereotypical, the ineditum reveals Cumont's tendency to always weigh the pros and the cons. The use of a racial vocabulary in his writings is typical for the era in which he conducted his work. In the first three editions of *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* Cumont explicitly rejected the racial theories proposed by Chamberlain and Seeck. But by the late twenties, Cumont seems to have changed his views: both in the fourth edition of the classic (1929) and in the Copenhagen ineditum, he accepts not only the epigraphical evidence put forward by Tenney Frank but also the racial theories adopted by this American scholar. The success of these new cults is now explained by the emergence of a new racial mix in the West. This impregnation of racial ideas is somehow paradoxical: it contradicts the evolutionist pattern of the *Religions orientales*, in which their success was originally explained by their inherent spiritual superiority.

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