



Death and Transfiguration: Religion and Belonging in Felix Gotthelf's Indian Opera *Mahadeva* (1910)

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FAITH AND MODERNITY: A DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP

On 24 October 1910, the *Badische Presse* (Baden Press) published an article on its front page entitled 'The oath against modernism'. It reported how, in the diocese of Metz, all the 'general vicars and canons, the arch-priests of the whole diocese, the ecclesiastical professors of all institutions, the parish priests and chaplains of the city and surrounding area' had gathered in the chapel of the seminary 'to take the oath against modernism prescribed by the Pope for all priests of the world' (*Badische Presse* 1910). This oath, introduced by Pope Pius X on 1 September 1910, dismissed as heresies any interpretations of the Christian faith that regarded technical, scientific, or social innovations as progress. The resulting polemics

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I. Schwaderer, G. Jonker (eds.), *Religious Entanglements Between
Germans and Indians, 1800–1945*, Palgrave Series in Asian German
Studies, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40375-0_5

deepened the rifts, especially with liberal Protestants and, generally, in the broader social circles of Wilhelmine Germany (Scheppers 2016; Wolf 2009).

A divergence between Christianity and modernity was, however, a cause for concern for more people than conservative Catholics. Despite ample historical biblical scholarship and research into the life of Jesus, the relationship between faith, knowledge, religion, and the natural sciences was by no means decided, even in liberal Protestant circles, so the controversy certainly existed, even if by means other than a papal decree. On the same page, the newspaper announced the guest appearance on 28 November 1910 of *Mahadeva*, a symphonic drama by Felix Gotthelf (1867–1931). In a lengthy commentary, the newspaper described how the opera promised an eloquent account of idealism, Indian epistemology, and the ‘mystical unity of ego and universal being’ (Meister 1910). While the papal decree raised concerns about the ‘demise of theological faculties’ (*Badische Presse* 1910) and the acceptability of scientific knowledge being abandoned in favour of a putative ‘purity of faith’ (*Badische Presse* 1910), the city’s educated public awaited the staging of a musical drama in the style of Richard Wagner (1813–83), which, as a religious musical event, promised temporary salvation through a work of art.

The musical drama *Mahadeva* by the otherwise little-known composer and self-taught writer Felix Gotthelf is now a forgotten artistic event that took place during a phase of radical transition. More interesting than its significance as a work of art is its role as a symptom of the controversy over the relationship between religion and modernity. *Mahadeva* is particularly difficult to classify if one follows the historico-teleological approach of thinkers like Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Max Weber (1864–1920), who understood modernity as an irreversible process occurring under the auspices of disenchantment and secularization (see Thurner 2021 on Troeltsch; and Yelle and Trein 2021 on Weber). Instead, I propose reversing this view and seeing it as a negotiation between the religious and the secular, not to be misunderstood as a tale of increasing disenchantment and decay of religious values. Rather, the process should be understood as an integral part of the confessional debates that establish narratives rather than timeless theories (Habermas 2019: 4).

For this purpose, however, I will first classify the artistic horizon of the work and, in a second section, situate its religious resonances in a Protestant reception of Wagner and Schopenhauer. I have traced the intellectual connections and friendships of composers, writers, journalists, and professors in the almost exclusively male circles of the Wagner family and the

Schopenhauer Society. In a further step, I shall explain how the debates about the *Mahadeva* are tightly interwoven into the political and social discourses of the period immediately before the catastrophe of the First World War. The Indian opera tells a story of popular debates on religious experiences in music and how German Christianity should be played out. It is also a story of bold German self-images of cultural superiority over other European nations.

The search for historical material for this study stretched over a long period, and many new findings continued to shed light on the opera's cultural and historical relevance. I started by asking why the dancers and musicians in the Menaka Indian ballet received such wide attention as *völkisch* art during the Nazi era (see Schlaffke, Schwaderer, and Kanhai, Chap. 12 in this volume). Extensive visits to Weimar's Anna Amalia Library, which specializes in German literature, philosophy, and music—with excellent nineteenth- and twentieth-century holdings, including rare journals—led to the serendipitous discovery of an intellectual circle that united particular interests, namely philosophy, India, and music. This was the Schopenhauer Society, and its yearbooks recorded the entire debate that later, in the 1930s, presaged the reception and political instrumentalization of a tour of Indian artists. The Düsseldorf and Karlsruhe municipal archives contain press reviews of the performances, and the Saxon State and University Library Dresden house the residue of Felix Gottself's estate. A closer examination of persons connected to the Schopenhauer Society (Schwaderer 2021) and a detailed analysis of works of art with an Indian connection originating in this environment (I have analysed another in Schwaderer 2022) finally provided a key with which to understand the reactions examined in the further contributions to this volume.

A FORGOTTEN INDIAN OPERA

Little is known about the private life of Felix Gottself, but for details of what is known, see Markus Schlaffke's Chap. 6 in this volume. Gottself took a ballad by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) entitled *Der Gott und die Bajadere* (The God and the *Bayadère*) as the model for his drama *Mahadeva* (Goethe 1798). In it, Goethe draws on a French travelogue by Pierre Sonnerat, which includes a section on the '*bayadères*, or dancing girls, whose true name [is] *devadāsī*, who devote themselves to honouring the gods, and at whose processions they sing and dance before

their images' (Sonnerat 1782: 29; see also Schlage 2018). In the European tradition, *bayadères* were mainly seen as sacred prostitutes.

Goethe draws on Christian motifs, but playfully repurposes them in a philanthropic and humanist way (Wild 1996). While the incarnation of the deity and redemption through ascension are well-known aspects of Christian doctrine, Goethe emphasizes the sensual side of love, which causes the protagonist to transcend herself. In the end, the poem recognizes neither contrition nor penitence, but rather the genuine feelings of love that Goethe's contemporaries saw as 'anti-Christian and critical of religion' (Wild 1996: 292). Goethe depicts the supreme deity as a benevolent figure who is experiencing life on Earth and who regards joy and anguish as essential components of compassion. In her love encounter with the god, the *bayadère* undergoes such a profound transformation that she sacrifices herself. Despite these various religious motifs, the ballad is not a doctrinal piece about sin and repentance. Instead, its emphasis is on a fictitious encounter with the deity and the transformative power of love. This detail is important because later adaptations focus on the atoning aspect of a 'repentant sinner', or see the dancer as 'Mary Magdalene' being uplifted by the deity.

Apart from Goethe, Gotthelf's main inspiration for his *opus magnum*, his only opera, came from Richard Wagner's redemptive drama *Parsifal*, which had been premiered on 26 July 1882. Gotthelf composed the *Mahadeva*, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or rather a religious—philosophical—musical opera in which he imitated Wagner's work down to the smallest detail—see Schlaffke (Chap. 6 in this volume) on his use of the *Parsifal* music. However, apart from this, he was also productive and quite well respected as a journalist on musical and philosophical subjects, although he always modestly admitted to being self-taught (Gotthelf 1919: 288). Gotthelf wrote for newspapers and cultural magazines and was well known in the Bayreuth Circle of Wagner admirers, in which he also came across Schopenhauer's philosophy for the first time. The *Mahadeva* was Gotthelf's only extensive work and in it he turned the above-mentioned Goethe ballad into a religious-artistic manifesto. Between 1909 and 1916, *Mahadeva*, or parts of it, were staged in German cities such as Stuttgart, Düsseldorf (where the premiere was held in 1910), Karlsruhe, and Munich, and, in 1916 and 1917, audiences in Vienna heard a choral scene. Gotthelf dedicated the opera to his mentor and friend, the Kiel history of philosophy professor Paul Deussen (1845–1919), whom he described on the dedicatory page as the 'rediscoverer of Vedic wisdom' (Gotthelf 1908: 3). The

opera was thus not only a musical work, but also a contributor to the contemporary national discourse on religious renewal.

MAHADEVA: THE PLOT

While the libretto (Gotthelf 1908) is based mainly on the story in Goethe's ballad, Gotthelf shifts the narrative in favour of Maya, an ostracized dancer living as a member of the *cāṇḍāla* (the considered untouchable) on the outskirts of the city. After a loving union and the unknown visitor's death, Maya jumps into the pyre and the play ends with the couple's transfiguration. To build up the dramatic tension that keeps the story going, Gotthelf adds two characters, the pilgrim Narada and Maya's lover Kama. Although their contribution to the narrative is minimal, they sing duets to express the main character's inner conflicts and give form to her complex characteristics. Gotthelf places the subject in a religious and cosmic framework with a prelude in heaven. The deity Mahadeva (Shiva), the centre of the universe, wakes up with a longing to be, or what Gotthelf (1908: 8) called a 'thirst for existence'. The state of blissful non-existence thus ends, and the world comes into being. The god awakens from the complaints of humankind and realizes that he is responsible for his creation, which has arisen from his dream and his desire. He decides to redeem his guilt through his incarnation, and the chorus of the divine dancers is already announcing the redemption—'Hope's saying/Be proclaimed to you,/death love/overcomes: Homewards leads thee/the path of highest sacrifice's /deed of love' (Gotthelf 1908: 15).

In the first scene, the dancer Maya rejects her lover Kama and approaches the sanctuary of Mahadeva (Shiva). She seeks blessings from the saint Narada, but an outraged crowd chases her away. In its human form, the deity observes the scene, is disappointed by its moral depravity, and approaches the dancer. Kama tries to drive him away but the deity stops him. After that, the plot returns to the *bayadère* ballad, but with an eschatological backdrop. The deity accepts the dancer's invitation to her house and allows her to take care of him, but instead of a physical encounter, the deity gives the dancer an explanation for her inner conflict: Her subordinate status is a punishment for having committed an offence in a previous life when she was living as a *brahmin's* daughter and had betrayed her lover and had him killed for purely selfish motives. This moralizing twist in the plot is taken from a Buddhist legend from a then widely known

book by the French Indologist Eugène Burnouf (1801–52), the *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (Burnouf 1844: 205 ff.).

Maya's story reveals the cosmic connections of her personal fate. Having recognized her guilt, her longing for redemption is no longer just a vague feeling but follows a rational course: If she has sinned in the past, she must atone for it now. This insight into the relationships in her life not only redeems her, but also, in the second half of the drama, enables her to redeem others. After this slight addition to the middle of the plot, Gotthelf returns to Goethe's ballad. When the guest is found dead the following morning, Maya insists on being burned with him as his wife and calmly enters the flames, despite the protests of the priests. The transfiguration in the last director's note reads, 'from the flames emerges Mahadeva, slowly carrying Maya up in his arms' (Gotthelf 1908: 85). The final image resembles the beginning, when, in the state of unity before the creation of the world, 'lotus flowers, in whose opened chalice the couple appears' (Gotthelf 1908: 86) are seen floating on the calm surface of the sea.

PRESS REACTION

The Düsseldorf premiere of *Mahadeva* on 7 March 1910, and the guest performance in Karlsruhe on 28 November 1910, both of which received wide coverage in the newspapers, give us some impression of this now forgotten musical event. The composer spared no expense in having two new stage sets designed, which the Düsseldorf artist Georg Hacker (1864–1945) executed (Düsseldorf Statistisches Amt 2023: 112). These stage sets, which not only heightened the theatrical illusion but also needed to be transported to Karlsruhe, consisted of two characteristically Indian landscape paintings, which as backdrops produced a good long-distance effect, along with lotus blossoms that opened and closed, albeit not always smoothly (*Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* 1910). To prepare the Karlsruhe audience for the event, Richard Meister (1881–1964), a close friend of Gotthelf's from Vienna, provided a detailed résumé of the religious and ideological background to the drama (Meister 1910). Moreover, in the early afternoon before the performance, the director and conductor held a didactic lecture on the work at the Düsseldorf city theatre, which included salient musical motifs of its religious transfiguration. However, while these introductions were designed to enhance the reception of the work, they also revealed its shortcomings. 'In its embarrassing verbosity', remarked the otherwise only moderately enthusiastic critic of the socialist

newspaper *Volksfreund* (1910: 1), ‘Meister’s erudite introduction was unsuitable’.

The editor-in-chief of the *Badische Presse*, Albert Herzog (1867–1955), was sympathetic to the play and wrote a detailed review of it in which he, like all the other reviewers, emphasized its unique nature, and called it a ‘mystery averted from real mundane life’ (Herzog 1910). The other-worldliness of its religious theme did not provoke ridicule from any of the reviewers; on the contrary, one took it quite seriously and wrote in the *Karlsruher Tagblatt* of 28 November 1910:

In his drama, Dr. Gotthelf tried to express the philosophical, ethical, and religious character of Brahmanism, which in some respects is related to Christianity. In doing so, he starts from the knowledge inherent in all superior cultural religions, namely the union of the human soul with God through the sacrifice of love. However, in a mystical, almost magical way, he builds his entire drama on a mythical element in which he makes the deity appear on the stage in various forms, thus from the outset excluding any profound effect. ... What is excellent in the Goethean ballad on which the poet–composer draws, is impossible for the drama. Yes, if God had become a divine man, then the entire drama would have gained much credibility.

Gotthelf’s design of an intellectual religion of redemption remained unchallenged; only when he deviated too far from the model, and left the act of saving to a woman instead of a ‘divine man’, did the work no longer seem convincing. Regardless of the highly idealistic values it conveyed, the effect on the audience was nevertheless limited. ‘The main flaw in this generous work’, the author of the *Volksfreund* sarcastically noted, ‘is particularly noticeable when it is presented as a stage work – its length!’ (*Volksfreund* 1910: 2). Moreover, the critics emphasized the epigonal character of one of the last of Wagner’s imitators in which the poetry lifted the creator ‘high above the bombastic ecstasy of sound in the comet’s tail of Richard Wagner’s ‘word-sound-dramas’ of an earlier epoch erring through opera literature’. It was an altogether remarkable work containing ‘sublime beauties’ as well as ‘thorny, impassable undergrowth of harmony’ (*Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* 1910).

However, if the work was probably of little artistic significance, if not entirely out of time, it nonetheless reveals social dynamics that temporarily secured it a place on at least two stages. The sponsors of the presumably rather expensive guest appearance in Karlsruhe, Prince Max of Baden

(1867–1929), and his wife Maria Louise (1879–1948), ‘attended the performance to the very end’, as the Karlsruhe newspaper explicitly pointed out (Z. 1910). Prince Max, the last heir to the throne of the Grand Duchy of Baden and, in 1918, the last chancellor of the German Empire, ‘was an aesthete and eternal seeker of meaning who felt attracted not only to the musical but also to the politico-religious spirit of the Bayreuth Circle’ (Urbach and Buchner 2004: 125; see also Bermbach 2016). A close connection to Bayreuth is visible in his correspondence with Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927), who not only spread Wagner’s anti-Semitism as the basis of his worldview to broad swathes of readers but also legitimized his Aryan fantasies with the same Indological sources that Gotthelf himself had integrated into his music drama—namely the books of Paul Deussen. This strong connection may have been one reason for bringing the monumental production to Karlsruhe.

In *Mahadeva*, redemption and salvation are the critical terms of the drama and, in his musical offering, Gotthelf offered his audience the exact same thing. This was temporary relief from the urgent and painful questions of the time—the relationship between religion and the natural science on the one hand, and the national and political self-image of the Germans vis-à-vis their European neighbours on the other. The discussions about *Mahadeva* followed the Schopenhauer tradition. They were continued by Richard Wagner, further developed in the Bayreuth Circle, and thus inspired a circumscribed range of people in the Schopenhauer Society.

SCHOPENHAUER, WAGNER, AND THE REDEMPTION DRAMAS

By dedicating the libretto of the drama to Paul Deussen, Gotthelf joined the circle of Schopenhauer’s more artistically-minded followers. Gotthelf wrote occasional pieces on the theoretical and philosophical aspects of music, and his reflections on the Schopenhauer and Wagner tradition made him a recognized specialist in this artistic-cum-philosophical niche. On 15 November 1915, he gave a lecture on Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner at the Vienna Urania, a precursor of today’s adult education centres, which he based on an article he was writing for the Wagner circle’s journal, the *Bayreuther Blätter* (Gotthelf 1916). A few months earlier, he had published an article under the same title in the Schopenhauer Society’s yearbook (Gotthelf 1915). This created a bridge between the two scholarly circles, which brought the respective founding figures closer to each

other. For his articles, he would collect sources in which Schopenhauer and Wagner referred to one another, although they had never met in person, but in so doing, established a link between the philosopher and musician that is still generally accepted today. According to this, Wagner came to recognize his own worldview in Schopenhauer's philosophy (Karnes and Mitchell 2020). Also, by bringing Indian philosophy and Christian religion to the stage in a symphonic drama, Gotthelf could, in an unspoken way, consider himself a disciple of Schopenhauer and a performer of Wagner. Below, I shall show how Gotthelf incorporated material from his own models into a broader context while imitating Wagner's works.

WAGNER'S SHARE: *MAHADEVA*—A COSMIC DRAMA ABOUT LOVE, DEATH, AND SALVATION

Goethe's ballad celebrates a sensual encounter between a human being and a deity and thus ironically deconstructs the religious ideas of his time, in which bodily pleasure was declared a sin. Gotthelf, conversely, is very serious about his drama of redemption. He exaggerates the different variants of the figures in an 'Indian legend' and inserts them into a theatre on a cosmic scale—and they are all based on Schopenhauer's philosophy (Meister 1931: 373).

He was not the first composer to cherish such an ambitious project, as the young Felix Weingartner's (1863–1942) example will show. Schopenhauer became the 'gateway drug' to his alternative reality, much like swallowing the 'red pill' in *The Matrix* (1999), a science-fiction film in which the Schopenhauerian mood was projected onto a dystopian vision of the future of a people caught up in an illusory reality. Weingartner became acquainted with this worldview when Cosima Wagner (1837–1930), second wife of the composer and trustee of his legacy, introduced him to one of Schopenhauer's books for the first time (Weingartner 1928: 263). The 'powerful vibrations of knowledge of this peculiarly gloomy philosophy', which sent people 'into a state of lasting, elated happiness', mesmerized quite a few members of the Wagner family circles he regularly attended (Weingartner 1928: 317). Also, his enthusiasm lasted, as Weingartner proved with his wide-ranging accounts of his philosophical and ideological position in *The Doctrine of Rebirth and the Musical Drama* (Weingartner 1895). The Indian–Schopenhauer–Wagner triad provided the anthropological backdrop to his cultural and musical

enterprise (Weingartner 1895: 48–9). As he (Weingartner 1895: 68–9, original italics) put it:

[This triad] is, however, [not only] a reflection of the essence of the world, but an incomparably nobler and more refined one than we customarily perceive with our daily senses. ... Its effect on the musical drama will therefore also be one of *idealization*, of *elevation* above the ordinary level, and even of *transfiguration*.

Here Weingartner, who professed the ‘Brahmanic–Buddhist doctrine of rebirth’, found a worldview superior to the Christian doctrine of morality, which in the ‘negation of the will to life’ means the end of a rebirth process, in other words, final redemption. As Weingartner (quoted in Gebhard 1931: 369) explained:

After Schopenhauer’s philosophy recently showed us the way to redemption, and Wagner, through his great discovery, gave us the opportunity to create true musical dramas, the production of such a drama, which would express the idea of redemption from rebirth in a pure form, is one of the most glorious tasks that the artist can face.

Weingartner’s monumentally designed drama *Mysterium* was a Christian passion play, yet in its epilogue the redemption is achieved in Buddhist India (Weingartner 1895). Unsurprisingly, he never elaborated it beyond a sketch, whereas Gotthelf carefully penned and composed *Mahadeva* down to the minutest detail. He attended a performance of *Parsifal* in 1884, which had premiered only 2 years before, ‘with the enthusiasm of the awakened’ (Meister 1931: 371) and had taken from it the longing for redemption as the driver of the plot. Richard Wagner had already framed his opera in explicitly religious terms, calling it a *Bühnenweihfestspiel* (stage pageant) and enacting baptism and the Last Supper in the story of the knights around the Holy Grail. Both composers negotiated the themes of purity and contamination, spirituality and sexuality, and renunciation and redemption. Just as Wagner moved the action of his play to some fictitious Germanic Middle Ages, Gotthelf used Schopenhauer’s India as the setting for his philosophical and religious reflections, and shaped the plot of the Indian dancing girl quite differently from that of his Goethe model. His was ironic, romantic praise for sensual love resulting from humanistic

convictions, whereas Gotthelf's was a monumental and difficult-to-digest cosmic drama.

‘*BÜSSERIN IN DER HÜLLE DES ZAUBERWEIBS*’ (PENITENT
IN THE CLOAK OF THE SORCERESS): OBSESSION
OR LIBERATION?

As described, *Mahadeva*'s central motif is the path to redemption. Unlike Goethe's *bayadère*, the dancer regrets her previous conduct in life and her attachment to sensual pleasure, and acknowledges her betrayal of love in an earlier existence—‘I once hated / Him who cherished me, /I once murdered/Him who loved me’ (Gotthelf 1908: 78). This purifies her—‘Broken is sin’s /Addictive desire; / Finished repentance’s /Tormenting anxiety; /From earthly distress /Saved in salvation’ (Gotthelf 1908: 61). She then renounces her past and embarks on a path to spiritual development, along which the descended god supports her, although without any physical union. In the plot, she develops from a vibrant, sensual woman into one adopting asceticism. In a letter to the singer Hedy Brügemann (1879–1941) of 15 March 1910, Gotthelf describes this by saying that ‘in Act I, Maya is not yet a penitent Magdalene. She is corrupt, but inwardly pure and above all naive like a child’ (Gotthelf 1910). Only later does she become conscious of her depravity and ‘the full tragedy [comes] to light for the first time, [in which] she is not only the despised hetaera but also the outcast and impure *cāṇḍālā*’ (Gotthelf 1910). Realizing her guilt, she finally repents, renounces and prepares for the ultimate sacrifice. Here the major transformation takes place, which the author (Gotthelf 1910) describes as follows:

Only now she feels worthy of the marvellous friend; she grows up to him, but there is now nothing sensual in her passion, the earthly love is completely overcome, it is the pure heavenly love, it is a relationship like that between [Mary] Magdalene and Christ. At the same time, she has also attained knowledge; she has grasped the real connection between guilt and atonement. And now she feels free from guilt and remorse and knows herself worthy of the sublime beloved.

Leopold von Schroeder (1851–1920), an Indologist in Vienna and member of both the Bayreuth Circle and Schopenhauer Society, also praised the opera's fascinating protagonist—‘the sinner who becomes a loving

wife sacrificing herself in a death by flames, a martyr, she has grown to cosmic significance' (Schroeder 1917: 124).¹ In this ecstatic moment, the sinner becomes a saint and the vehicle of redemption. The cremation of the corpse in the last act and the obstacles to her eventual sacrifice are merely preparations for the final salvation. Maya, the sinful convert promoted from the lowest social level to almost a godhead is the real miracle and religious centre of the play's plot.

Maya's character is composed of a mixture of different models. Several scenes mirror motifs found in the Gospels and popular religion in which Jesus meets a 'sinful woman'. In his letter to Brügelmann, Gotthelf draws on the relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene. The cipher of the repentant sinner follows a medieval tradition that conflated several female figures of the biblical and apocryphal traditions (Almond 2023: 7–12). By the sixth century, Pope Gregory had already equated Mary Magdalene with the wealthy woman and unnamed sinner who proclaimed the message of Jesus's resurrection to the apostles (John 20: 11–18), and who washed Jesus's feet in the Pharisee's house and anointed him with expensive oil (Luke 7: 36–50). In the Gospel of Luke, the main disciple Simon [Peter] criticizes the woman as well as the action by saying that 'if this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner' (Luke 7: 39). The sin of this nameless woman was considered prostitution, exacerbated by dissipation. Jesus, however, reverses the accusation and his answer can be read as the key to the entire love and redemption metaphor of this opera, as well as of a large number of works of art of the time with a similar theme: This socially ostracized woman has shown him more love and adoration than his own disciples: 'therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little' (Luke 7: 47). For this, she deserves more attention than his faithful disciples, which also explains why she was honoured by the resurrected's first apparition (Almond 2023: 19–20).

Maya, however, embodies yet another female figure from Jesus's environment who belongs to a group of socially unacceptable people

¹For a comparison between Buddhism and Christianity, see Schroeder (1893). Von Schroeder was an Indologist who wrote more than one theatrical play on Indian subjects (Roy 2017: 739). On von Schroeder's views on what he understood as 'Aryan religion', see Myers (2013: 184–91); and on his connections with the Wagnerians, see Roy (2017: 740–1).

who come exceptionally close to him. She invites the unknown wanderer into her house. Although she will stain his ritual purity, the guest asks for a cup of water, but Maya initially refuses: ‘O may I refresh thee! /But alas, from the impure hand/ The pure may spurn /The drink of refreshment’ (Gotthelf 1908: 55–6). This scene is modelled on Jesus’s encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well; here, likewise, the woman hesitates to offer the desired drink (John 4: 9). In the biblical story, however, the difference concerns groups ‘within a broad spectrum of Israelite-Jewish religiosity’ (Böhm 2010), in which different sects are not allowed to share tables (and this includes accepting a cup of water). For the scene in the *Mahadeva*, the salient point about the meeting at the well is that the woman had relations with several men and was living in a non-legitimate relationship (John 4: 18). To her, Jesus promises the water that quenches thirst for eternity (John 4: 14). From the early tradition, this thirst is understood as a metaphor for erotic desire and links the scene to a Schopenhauerian worldview fuelled by an unbridled will to live.

Maya and Mahadeva are the Indian equivalents of characters in well-known stories in the Christian tradition about love and repentance. *Mahadeva* was not therefore an attempt to stage an Indian drama or even an exoticizing fantasy, but simply a pastiche of Wagnerian motifs in Indian disguise and maybe an attempt to realize Wagner’s unwritten Buddhist opera *The Siegers* (App 2011: 28–40). At the time of its performance, *Mahadeva* complied with the interpretation approved by the circle around Cosima Wagner, the custodian of her late husband’s artistic and ideological legacy, and one that hardly allowed any alternatives.

Musicologist and writer Arthur Prüfer (1868–1944) referred to this constellation of love, sin, and redemption in his popularizing introduction to the works of Wagner (Prüfer 1909: 182–3). The character of Maya was based on Wagner’s Kundry in *Parsifal*, a similarly enigmatic figure. She approaches the protagonist with a view to seducing him but, through her self-sacrifice, experiences the transformation into a lover (Kitagawa 2015: 127–9). She does not redeem herself, however, as this happens in the baptism by the saviour Parsifal. What connects Wagner’s and Gotthelf’s two female figures is their inner development, for in Wagner’s last work Kundry is also conflictive and is thus a ‘threshold figure of modernity’ who carries elements or traces of Judeo-Christian and Indian Buddhist culture (Kitagawa 2015: 55). In her ambivalence, she is symptomatic of modern times. Kundry was, in the words of Wendell Kretzschmar, a fictitious

character in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, 'the penitent in the garb of the sorceress' (Mann 1999: 68) and the symbolic figure for music par excellence. Thus, Gotthelf's Maya, whose name is associated with deception in the material world, simultaneously embodies sensual pleasure and immaculate innocence. At first, she is an ostracized and exotic outsider, yet driven by a longing for the redemption that the society denies her. Maya, who personifies humanity, begins her journey in sensual attachment to the material world, but decides to repent and renounce it. In doing so, she redeems herself, the deity, and the entire world. *Mahadeva* ends with the annulment of multiplicity through unity: 'Multiplicity far faded/Unity near attained. /World delusion escaped, /Highest salvation won' (Gotthelf 1908: 86).

SCHOPENHAUER'S SHARE: MAYA, THE WILL, AND PESSIMISM

Schopenhauer has been considered the artists' philosopher (Mann 1974: 530) because he granted them the special gift of genius. These geniuses, he claimed, can maintain themselves in a purely intuitive state, grasping the ideas, the 'immediate and adequate objecthood of the thing in itself' (Schopenhauer 2014: 207). Moreover, music occupies the highest position in the hierarchy of the arts because it can express all aspects of the will, always in the 'universality of mere form' (Schopenhauer 2014: 291). Life consists of suffering, says Schopenhauer, as 'the will, existence itself, is a constant suffering, partly miserable, partly horrible; on the other hand, the same thing as representation alone, purely intuited, or repeated in art, free from pain, affords a meaningful spectacle (*Schauspiel*)' (Schopenhauer 2014: 295). Art, therefore, offers the only possibility of temporarily alleviating the burden of life.

When exactly Gotthelf first became aware of Schopenhauer's philosophy is not yet known, but as a reader of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, Gotthelf definitely knew about Paul Deussen, for he regularly sent his work to the journal, which Chamberlain would review and praise to the hilt (Feldhoff 2009: 198, 204). Both men, Gotthelf and Deussen, described their relationship as a friendship (Deussen 1922: 335, 350), despite the age difference and considerable social inequality between them. Deussen mentioned first meeting the ambitious musician in Düsseldorf during Easter 1907,

when out walking in the Ahr valley with Deussen's Düsseldorf relatives, the Herzfelds² (Deussen 1922: 335). He met him a second time in October 1913, when, at Gotthelf's invitation, Deussen gave three popular lectures on Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche at the Vienna Urania before an audience of 500 people (Deussen 1922: 350). Although certainly not a friendship between equals, Gotthelf wrote an obituary for Deussen in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, in which he highlighted those of the professor's traits that had become formative for him, especially his 'truly popular attitude' (Gotthelf 1919: 288). By this, he meant that Deussen's works resonated beyond their expected academic audience, especially among artists, 'opera singers and conductors' (Gotthelf 1919), in other words, among those likely to read his obituary in the journal of Richard Wagner's friends.

These people also made up the audience of Gotthelf's *Mahadeva*. The *Düsseldorfer Generalanzeiger* mentioned the appearance of 'numerous theatre directors and many representatives of the non-local press' at its opening in Düsseldorf (A. E. S. 1910). And, at its premiere in Karlsruhe on 28 November 1910, the *Badische Presse* also noted that 'the foreign stage directors, conductors and critics who came to the performance confirmed the importance of this theatrical evening' (Herzog 1910). Here, a circle of people had gathered who were connected not only through their interest in the music of Wagner and his imitators, which was very popular at the turn of the century, but also through their particular worldview. This circle linked the musical dramas with a dose of Deussen's 'stencil-like simplification' (Atzert 2015: 80), a considerably diluted philosophy of Schopenhauer, transferred by Wagner's reception and reduced to a nostalgic search for origins in a supposedly superior Indian culture (King 1999: 118, 62–72; Masuzawa 2005: 121–45). The musical-poetic work had become a mystically elated product that had moved well beyond theatrical entertainment and was tied up with a late attempt at *Kunstreligion*. In the early nineteenth century, this 'arose in response to the perception that German society was yielding its national identity to foreign, secular,

²Albert Herzfeld (1865–1943), a former co-owner of a spinning mill and artist from Düsseldorf, was married to Paul Volkmar's daughter Else (born in Berlin on 10 June 1882), and was Paul Deussen's brother-in-law. He was murdered in the Theresienstadt concentration camp on 13 February 1943. His fate is unhappily linked to Paul Deussen's estate stored in the Herzfeld family apartment, which had been looted after the deportation of the wealthy family in 1942 (Feldhoff 2009: 187, 235).

Enlightenment influences and the belief that religion must play a crucial role in Germany's national redemption' (Stanley 2008: 154). The rather vague term *Kunstreligion* described art in the service of religion, perhaps even a substitute for religion, which accentuated deep feelings of elation and community (Nowak 1971).

GOTTHELF AND THE INDIAN RENAISSANCE

As the large attendance at his 1913 lectures in Vienna attested, Deussen was able to captivate the masses by successfully condensing the knowledge of humankind and reducing it to a few catchy phrases. We read in Gotthelf's obituary that Deussen was concerned with nothing less than the 'final reconciliation of science and religion' (Gotthelf 1919: 291), which he achieved by linking the millennia 'from Vajnavalkya to Kant and Schopenhauer'. He even adjusted to the Bayreuth ear by speaking of a 'primal affinity between the old Indian and the new German idealism' and a 'marriage of the Indian and German spirit' (Gotthelf 1919: 291). Many sought and found impulses for a religious reorientation in the texts of the Indian tradition, which Deussen had made known to a broad German audience. His translations of the *Upanishads* (Deussen 1897) and the *Brahma Sutra of Vedanta* (Deussen 1887), contributed significantly to the understanding and dissemination of Indian philosophy and religion in Germany (for an evaluation and criticism of his periodization of Indian philosophy, see Franco 2013: 2–6.) In his multi-volume general history of philosophy produced between 1894 and 1913, Deussen presented the Indian tradition as an integrative component of Occidental philosophy and its starting point. In addition, the translations of Vedic texts and Deussen's works on the history of philosophy were popular precisely because they were stylistically accessible. The constant repetition of the basic idea, which was neither groundbreaking nor philosophically demanding, lay in the continuity of Indian thoughts that materialized again in various historico-cultural contexts and found their culmination and conclusion in the philosophy of Kant and Schopenhauer.

As he continues his praise of Deussen, Gotthelf adds a considerable amount of his own concern and cultural scepticism when he speaks about the 'innermost longing of our unfortunate time for retrieving' the lost salvation contained in the 'belief in a moral meaning of the world' that Schopenhauer had founded (Gotthelf 1919: 291). Adopting the pathetic tone of Chamberlain's prose, he described (with considerable

philosophical incoherence) the ‘transcendental idealism’ that carries the ‘transcendental unity of all beings’, omits no cliché, and preaches the ‘Indian magic word *tat twam asi*’ to which the ‘delusion of multiplicity must vanish’ and that ‘separates individual from individual’. He then goes on to explain how ‘selfishness will be overcome’, and how ‘greed, hatred, envy, and malice will be transformed into selflessness, toleration, compassion and love’ (Gotthelf 1919: 291).

With these sentences in mind, Gotthelf’s mission is finally visible. In a Wagnerian sense, his artistic vision of the symphonic drama stood at the top of the artistic forms of expression and the philosophico-religious context. *Mahadeva* was, therefore, not meant to serve as purposeless entertainment, but rather contained the most profound expression of German culture. Gotthelf wrote about this in his treatise on the essence of music as early as 1893, in which he described music as the spirit of the Germanic and Christian worldview, as opposed to the ancient Hellenic one, and as ‘the noblest, purest humanity, of all-embracing love and purest religiosity’ (Gotthelf 1893: 53).

The whole musical project of *Mahadeva* thus had a religious background, and Gotthelf wrote an article about his own theological premises. Significantly, it did not appear in the *Bayreuther Blätter* but in a rather marginal journal called *Religion und Geisteskultur* (Religion and culture of the spirit) under the title ‘Indian renaissance’ (Gotthelf 1911). In it, he traced the idea of an Indian renaissance³ back to Chamberlain, who wrote enthusiastic reviews of Deussen’s Indian books in the *Bayreuther Blätter* and who was at the centre of a circle of Indianizing scholars, including the winner of the 1917 Nobel Prize in Literature, Karl Gjellerup (Schwaderer 2022). Redemption was to occur in the ‘salvation of the Christian faith through marriage with Indian knowledge’ (Gotthelf 1911: 68), in the

³At this point, some terminological differentiations are necessary. I am grateful to Eli Franco for pointing this out to me. The idea of a renaissance in the sense of a national rebirth already had a history in Germany by the time Gotthelf wrote his article. The enthusiasm of European readers for the newly discovered Indian texts combines with a romantic search for origins and an impulse for renewal, especially in Germany. In any case, the term ‘Oriental renaissance’ as the source of renewal seems to have been coined by the French historian Edgar Quinet and later adapted by Raymond Schwab (Schwab 1984), but is not limited to India. The sources for the discussion have been collected in Grünendahl (2015), where the author sometimes tends to draw apodictic conclusions. On the other hand, ‘Indian renaissance’ is commonly used for the flourishing in Bengal in the nineteenth century, which begins with Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833). However, if Gotthelf speaks of an ‘Indian renaissance’, he attributes it to Chamberlain (Gotthelf 1914: 106; Gotthelf 1917: 267).

final healing of the ‘Amfortas wound’, which, in the language of the Wagnerites, means the division of faith and knowledge brought about through the orientation of the modern world to scientific and economic principles (Gotthelf 1919: 292), or the ‘incurable affliction that ails modern humankind’ (Gotthelf 1911: 53).

In this text, numerous keywords and clichés about the Indian, or rather Aryan, religion and worldview appear in the Bayreuth Circle, starting with the ‘primeval homeland’ (Gotthelf 1911: 53) from which Occidental philosophy developed. Here, he follows Deussen and his idea of transcendental idealism, to turn his extreme monism into his music drama. Gotthelf sketches his theological approach and speaks of a unity (*brahman*) in multiplicity, the empirical reality that exists only apparently, the ‘veil of *māyā*’ (Schopenhauer 2014: 379), which conceals the fact that truth is overshadowed by the senses and thirst for existence (*trṣṇā*), also known as the erotic drive (*kāma*) (Gotthelf 1911: 54).

This condensed retranslation of Schopenhauer’s philosophy into Vedic texts is part of Deussen’s main argument, which he repeats again and again (Deussen 1894: viii–x). In the mystical devolution, Gotthelf continues, and in the redemption that arises from the realization of the unity of subject and object, one recognizes both ‘the ecstatic transfiguration of the sacred’ and the ‘highest ecstasy of the artist’ (Gotthelf 1911: 55). For Schopenhauer, the artistic spectacle (*Schauspiel*) had a soothing effect, even on his pessimistic worldview (Schopenhauer 2014: 295, 315–16). Accordingly, Gotthelf (1916: 30) continues, ‘the purifying ennobling of true art is therefore also based on the fact that it frees us, even if only for a few moments, from our selfishness and expands our self’. This happens in the ‘moral act of taming the senses and desire. Thus, *nirvāna* is also a state of highest purification and purity’ (Gotthelf 1916: 30). In his drama, Gotthelf leads his audience through the enactment of this transcendental experience—in which elements of Deussian Indianizing philosophy become personified—and on to salvation in community through artistic experience. ‘This is the inestimable significance of this highest art, that it transmits to thousands the inner miracle of salvation, which was once granted to the saint only in the solitary silence of the penitential forest on the holy Ganga stream, or else in the narrow monastic cell’ (Gotthelf 1916: 67–8). He calls this the ‘Last Supper of Art’, during which the children of the time ‘are led back from the faithless, sensual materialism ... to the pure idealism of faith’ and finally the ‘ecstatic force of music ... is

supposed to reawaken the religion that has died in our hearts' (Gotthelf 1916: 67–8).

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN NATIONAL IDENTITY: SOME CONCLUSIONS

So far, Gotthelf has outlined the artistic ideals of a late Wagnerian. He wrote *Mahadeva* to revive a unique musical-cum-religious experience, the powerful effect that the *Parsifal* had had on him almost three decades earlier, but which until its copyright expired in 1913 had rarely been performed. The staging of the symphonic drama *Mahadeva* was intended to provide an experience of ecstasy and unity to a very circumscribed group of mainly bourgeois, Protestant, male intellectuals facing the challenges of the modern world. Accordingly, the themes did not deal with real Indian stories, but rather with well-worn Christian themes transposed onto a fantastic backdrop against which Schopenhauer's philosophical concepts were played out on stage as characters in the drama. The audience was not supposed to see Indian themes, but to recognize what was really 'German' in its awareness of an autochthonous foundation for community life based on purely national principles in a blending of religion, philosophy, and music as a late form of Romanticism.

What he explicitly disavows, however, is the question in this context of the meaning of race. In the Bayreuth Circle, the anti-Semitism aggressively put forward by Chamberlain in particular (Bermbach 2015; Hein 1996) was a 'cultural code' (Volkov 2000: 13–36), sometimes covert but mostly overt, to which sympathizers apparently subscribed, even without need, when communicating in this society. Gotthelf (1911: 62) rejected the importance of the collective idea of race in favour of a Christian 'dignity of personality', which supposedly replaced the more primitive 'race dogma'. His criticism of the Indian caste system, which often had to serve to justify racial differences in what later became racial science (*Rassenkunde*), also sounds refreshing in this context. One can speculate whether this heterodox opinion, which Gotthelf did not express in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, has something to do with his humanist worldview, which Goethe had influenced, and from which *Mahadeva*'s inspiration came. However,

that his wife was of Jewish descent seemed insufficient reason to reject anti-Semitism. If one follows the train of thought in the text further, an elitist trait surfaces with the cult of the ‘ingenious personality’ and its ‘liberation ... and the abolition of the law’. Where ‘Brahmins and Jews, become high priests, scribes and Pharisees’, it was up to Jesus to melt this religiously ossified mass ‘by the flame of love’ (Gotthelf 1911: 63). In the end, Gotthelf again moves on the well-trodden paths of a widespread theological anti-Judaism, linked with an Enlightenment dualism that in its popularized form expressed only a poorly masked anti-Semitism (Mack 2003; Nirenberg 2004). The line of connection he draws between Schopenhauer’s ethics of compassion and the self-sacrificing love of Christ on the cross also seems Wagnerian, and his Indianized copy of *Parsifal* celebrates a radical ideal based on a blending of Schopenhauer and Wagner, Goethe and Deussen’s Indo-Germanic Christianity (Marchand 2009: 302).

Gotthelf was undoubtedly unique in his approach to this project. However, for a generation of readers, including quite a few women, musicians, artists, and literati, Deussen’s popular œuvre opened the door to a supra-temporal second reality. This Indian-inspired artistic idealism gradually developed into a bulwark of anti-modern, politically restorative national identity with strong anti-Semitic overtones. Schopenhauerian ideas served as a cipher through which people could recognize themselves, creating a counter space for discourses that were critical of capitalism and modernism, yet increasingly anti-democratic and anti-Semitic. As Christopher Ryan (2010: 62) pointed out, Schopenhauer ‘assimilated the ancient religions of India to his system to create a centre of opposition to positivism and materialism and to fill the gap opened up by the decline of Christian institutions in the wake of the increasing awareness of the intellectual indefensibility of historical Christianity’. Schopenhauer thus became the focus of a ‘kind of counterculture in the *Kaiserreich* that popularized discourses on non-Western religions’ (Knöbl 2019: 41; Marchand 2009: 302) and indirectly on the compatibility of the Christian faith with modernity. The perception of a dichotomy between Western, modern, and natural science-based understandings of the world often branded as ‘materialism’, and ‘German’ culture, which was seen as idealistic, that is based on spiritual principles and in which (Christian) faith was not abandoned in favour of ‘divisive knowledge’.

Clemens Albrecht (1993: 13) speaks of a ‘specifically German version of a dilemma ... underlying modernity in general’, in which the

replacement of authoritarian forms of government with democratic elements, as well as secularization, was perceived as a history of loss. Social and political disruptions, as well as the looming catastrophe of the First World War, which changed everything, caused great insecurities at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was compensated for ‘in an aggressive, nationalistically tinged habitus’ and expressed in ‘striving for world power and an ideology of superiority’ (Lörke 2010: 58). These particularly often used religion—and, in the German case, music—as a repository of knowledge and apologetic strategy (Potter 1998). The debates about faith in modernity were fought on different battlefields; if the Vatican tried to rally the faithful Catholics behind it in an international alliance and thus adopted a minority position in Germany, cultural Protestantism was a strictly national affair and oriented towards a supposedly German culture, using metaphors of organicity and inwardness. This was opposed to Western, materialist civilization, which conversely was adopted by socialists and democratic forces in Germany (Albrecht 1993).

A Karlsruhe critic from the ranks of the working people had criticized the play for lacking ‘the essential – the new!’ (*Volksfreund* 1910: 1). However, the deliberately epigonal drama of the Wagnerite was not supposed to be novel but to capture its audience’s expectations of self-assurance, a need for ‘eternal truths’ and ‘supra-temporal moral values’. As late as 1916, Gotthelf, convinced of Germany’s imminent victory, assured the readers of the *Bayreuther Blätter* that they were fighting on the right side against the exclusively material interests of their opponents, solely for a supreme spiritual good, the grail of young, unspoiled German culture against a rotten international civilization (Gotthelf 1916: 26). Christmas 1917 saw the last notes of the *Mahadeva* fade away in Vienna and the sublime melodies of a musical redemption that had failed to materialize finally fell silent.

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