



Roaming Between East and West: In Search of Religious Ecstasy in the Interwar Period

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In 1927, Irma Gohl (1906–64), a young woman studying astronomy and Egyptology at the University of Munich, published a poem called ‘Weltraumschiff’ (‘spaceship’) in *Die Rakete* (*The Rocket*) magazine (Gohl 1927: 144). As the mouthpiece of the newly founded association for space travel (*Verein für Raumschiffahrt*), the *Rocket’s* readers were German enthusiasts who dreamt of flying through space and, in return, would receive a wild assortment of ideas about other worlds, interplanetary travel, and technical inventions. Among the societies’ members were also university engineers and amateur technicians experimenting with gliders and aluminium-propelled rockets. Apart from creating a new body of talent that the Nazi regime would soon tap, their attempts to shoot missiles into the sky inspired fantasies like Fritz Lang’s film *The Woman in the Moon* and Irma Gohl’s poem (Smith 2014: 227).

The poem attracted the interest of fifteen-year-old Wernher von Braun (1912–77) and inspired him to join the society and undertake technical

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experiments. Braun grew up to become a famous, if controversial, rocket engineer who put his talents to work for the Nazis before joining the Americans. With others, the mere idea of space travel triggered all sorts of associations with science fiction and speculations about divine matters. Irma Gohl's poem was eventually translated into five languages and launched into space to celebrate what would have been von Braun's one hundredth birthday (ESA 2011; Institut Rabe 2012).

This chapter is essentially about the lives of Germans in search of religious ecstasy as a means of escaping the anger and dissent in their society following the First World War. Although Germany had started the war, it refused to take the blame for it. Instead, leading German thinkers diagnosed serious ruptures such as social fragmentation, loss of meaning, uprooting, the end of civilization, the death of God, and, not least, spiritual homelessness (Gordon 2013; Graf 2000; Marchand 2013). As a result, many Germans experienced severe psychological problems, and young people invented numerous escape mechanisms. They would probe such things as the vastness of the universe, the depths of history, and Eastern religions, and speculate endlessly about what might lie in outer space. Needless to say, the market in alternative religions boomed.

As the chapters in this book show, Germany has a long tradition of tapping into 'Eastern wisdom'. Enlightenment thinkers perused Eastern religions to expand their understanding of the Bible (Simon Wiesgickl). Around 1900, the appropriation of India by theology (Matthias Turner), opera (Isabella Schwaderer and Marcus Schlaffke), and food (Julia Hauser) had become a widespread phenomenon. Academics engaged in philological studies to explore Indian religions (Marchand 2009). The middle classes turned to theosophy and travelled to the Orient (Bigalke 2016). The generation born around 1900 could choose from a wide range of options to achieve the out-of-body experience that scholar of religion Rudolph Otto (1869–1937) called *mysterium tremendum* (Otto 1917). In fact, it was common knowledge among young people growing up after the First World War that it manifested as a piercing light and bodily tremors. In this state, Otto said, one could merge with 'God' (or alternatively, 'the spiritual world', 'the universe', or 'the divine'). The speed and intensity with which people pursued such experiences were, as shown below, another reflection of the deep crisis into which Germany had fallen (Rabinbach 2013).

By tracing such experiences, I examine the individualization of religion undertaken by the 1900 generation. From a sociology of religion

perspective, such individual approaches only became a feature of Western religion after 1945, when Christian religious institutions began to change (Luckmann 1967). However, as I show in this chapter, forms of religious individualization were taking place in the 1920s and 1930s, although these were associated with Islam rather than Christianity.

While conversion to Buddhism was widespread in Germany, turning to Islam was not. Stemming from the same geography and rooted in the same textual tradition as Judaism and Christianity, Islam had always forced Europeans to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the ‘dynamics of negation’ (Koselleck 1985: 217, see also the Introduction to this volume), Muslims were assigned the role of Europe’s negative counterpart.

However, the First World War had brought German soldiers into close contact with Middle Eastern countries in ways that, when Muslim Indians built a mosque in Berlin and offered Islam to the German capital as a genuinely ‘Indian’ religion, the time had come for some to exchange the lens of the ‘barbarians’ with that of the keepers of ‘Eastern wisdom’ and to include Islam in their explorations (Jonker 2016). That some of the future converts to the Lahore-Ahmadiyya Mosque also belonged to the Mazdaznan religious movement may have further helped smooth the way. In her chapter in this volume, Julia Hauser explains how this movement forged a bridge to Aryan identity without considering Hindus. Her observation sits nicely with the fact that, after the president of the convert community, Hugo Marcus (1880–1964), fled to Basel in 1939 because of the war, Dr. Devrient (dates unknown), president of Mazdanan Berlin, took his place (Devrient n.d.).

SOURCES AND STEPS AHEAD

After the First World War, Indian Muslims from Lahore settled in Berlin with a view to promoting the Ahmadiyya Reform Movement. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1846–1908), who founded the movement in the British Indian Punjab around 1900 to defend Islam from the aggressive attacks of Christian missionaries, presented himself as the *mujaddid* (reformer of the century). Later, he also claimed to be a *zilli nabi* (a prophet in the shadow of the Prophet). After his death in 1908, the movement split into two factions. The Lahore Ahmadiyya group dropped the *zilli nabi* claim, and henceforth presented themselves as liberal intellectuals wanting to advance the modernization of Islam through scholarly engagement with European thinkers. Conversely, the Qadiyani Ahmadiyya faction, the Ahmadiyya

Muslim Jamaat (AMJ), continued to view its founder as a messiah and prophet who incorporated and renewed the experiences of previous prophets (Jonker 2016: 12–35).

In 1923, mirroring the Christian mission structures with which it had grown familiar in Northern India, Lahore-Ahmadiyya targeted Berlin as its mission aim, and commissioned the missionary Maulvi Sadruddin (1880–1980) to build a mosque and attract a convert community. Having performed the task with fervour, he was soon able to hand over a thriving community to his successor Sheikh M. Abdullah (1898–1957). In institutionalizing the mission, Abdullah set up a sophisticated mosque administration and kept records of the seekers' experiences (Jonker 2022).

The mosque's archive shows that the missionaries' main aim was to create a 'bridge' between the European and Indian world rather than to bring about a state of ecstasy. The mission journal *Moslemische Revue* (sic) not only made ample room for conversion narratives, but also offered glimpses into the community life that the missionaries had created, which included intense intellectual exchanges, extending European networks, and encouraging intercultural marriages, for which the journal offered solid pieces of advice. The missionaries especially supported the search for a 'religion of the future', which, in harmony with the ideals of the Lahore-Ahmadiyya Reform Movement, would lastingly graft Western traditions onto the Eastern ones of Islam.

The mosque's archive and mission journal, *Moslemische Revue*, proved invaluable as sources. In some cases, it was possible to compare them with the private papers of some of the mosque's actors, including some of Irma Gohl's papers. In fact, Irma Gohl's remarkable life never received the attention it deserved and can be revealed here for the first time.¹ The private archives of Lisa Oettinger (1908–2006) and Hugo Marcus (1880–1964), I have dealt with elsewhere already. They will only be consulted in passing (Jonker 2018, 2020). The files in the Register Office of Berlin-Charlottenburg (1925–), the political archive of the Foreign Office (1936–39), the American Guild for German Cultural Freedom in Frankfurt am Main (1933–45), and the National Archives of Australia, all helped to complete the picture.

¹ I thank David Kelly for sharing his knowledge with me on Safiya Heuser in Queensland, Australia. In one of those rare research adventures in which luck and generosity play equal parts, comparing our sources brought us to the conclusion that Irma Gohl and Safiya Heuser were one and the same person.

I start this chapter with the thought that a religious experience needs to find expression in words, actions, and physical deeds before it can form part of social reality. To get a sense of what the seekers did towards achieving that goal, I shall describe Irma Gohl's journey in detail and place it against the backdrop of the experiences of her peers. Although the focus is on the 1900 generation, to deepen our understanding of what the younger generation was doing, I shall contrast their activities with those of the generation born around 1880. I end the chapter by looking at the religious experiments from the missionaries' point of view and tracing how they steered their way towards blending Western rationality with the 'Wisdom of the East' and, thus, reforming Islamic tradition.

'A SEA OF ECSTASY'

Irma Gohl (1906–64) was a true seeker. As the only child of Christian socialist parents, she grew up attending Württemberg's Lutheran Church (*Evangelische Landeskirche*), which was renowned for its orthodox and rebellious stance. However, her parents allowed her to explore the world around her and make her own decisions. Like many of her generation, she took to the task with fervour. Among the first women to study at university, she examined the traditions of her church and her family while trying to reach a spiritual state that would free her from the conventional constraints surrounding her and her generation.

At the age of fourteen, Irma Gohl (1932) launched headlong into the unknown. About that time, or so her narrative holds, she experienced an unhappy mixture of 'doubt', 'instinctive discomfort', 'disappointment', and 'longing'. This urged her to seek the 'truth', which she envisioned as 'light', or at least as something she would recognize when she saw it. At first, she joined the anthroposophical movement, a German back-to-nature branch of theosophy, where she came across the writings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986). But soon, they bored her, and she turned to studying the religions of India instead. Having worked her way through the accepted canon, including Buddhism, Manicheism, the teachings of Confucius and Tao, and Shintoism, she experienced a period of serious doubt, in which she saw religion as a 'mistake and form of auto suggestion' (Gohl 1932: 57).

In 1925, Irma Gohl entered university, not, as she took great care to point out, with a professional aim in mind, but quite the contrary to feed her 'search for God'. She chose astronomy, not to become a physicist but

to discover ‘the laws of God in the stars’ (Gohl 1932: 58). Admitting that her parents sometimes despaired of her choices, she steadily crafted a university package centred on the discovery of the self in relation to the transcendent world. Some years later, while standing on the gangway of the ship that brought her to Australia, she would declare to be a ‘student of astronomy and astrology, and also a writer’ (*Courier-Mail* 1936). The width of her claim once again underlines the importance she ascribed to exploring the unseen.

Her astronomy classes coincided with the publication of the poem ‘Cosmic Ship’, mentioned at the start of this chapter. As a matter of course, Irma Gohl joined the Society of Spaceship Travel the moment it was founded. The poem, in free rhyme, betrays how the blow of national degradation and the longing for salvation mingled in her search. Taking the rocket as a symbol of flight, the poem contains a string of superlatives that conjure up the image of a nation lifted in fire and propelled to the outer world with the help of superhuman master minds: ‘Upon the fiery wings of the rocket / The dreams of curious man will conquer / proudly and boldly, far away worlds. / The glorious work of the Human Spirit / Will master the supreme power of the Cosmos’ (quoted in Smith 2014: 227) (Fig. 9.1).

Irma Gohl looked upon herself as a poet, but how many poems she wrote escapes our knowledge. All we know is that in 1938, while in exile, she sent a book manuscript to the American Guild for German Cultural Freedom in New York called *Mira, Kind des Uranus* (Mira, Child of Uranus). From the letters the American Guild wrote to her—she now called herself Safiya Heuser and used *Kassandra* as her nom de plume—we learn that the guild sent the manuscript to Thomas Mann (1875–1955), the famous German writer in exile in New York, for review. When Mann rejected it, the guild sent it back to her. A short note written by the secretary on duty betrays that the gentlemen judged Irma Gohl/Safiya Heuser’s work to be ‘a biography of the self, consisting of highly dilettante poems’ (Berman 1938).

From Irma Gohl’s own letters to the guild, we learn that her flight from Nazi Germany landed her in a desperate situation. Living in a primitive hut in the Australian outback, she cared for four young children and a sick husband while writing at night to earn a living for her family (Heuser 1938a, b, 1939a, b). Although the guild had been set up precisely to support Germans like her, it chose to treat her with disdain and even the manuscript seems to have gone missing in the exchange.

Fig. 9.1 *Die Rakete*:
*Zeitschrift für
 Raumschiffahrt.*
January–July 1927. The
 subtitle reads: ‘In 1½
 hours around the earth’.
 (Source: Wikipedia.
 Author: Spaceship
 Association (closed
 in 1934))



Fortunately, the letters still divulge some key information on the manuscript’s contents. *Mira, Child of Uranus* seems to have served as Irma Gohl’s alter ego, and a receptacle for the unrest that drove her on. Astrologically, Uranus stands for the difficult balance between stability and renewal, love of freedom and revolution, change and recklessness (Questico 2023). We do not know in which month she was born, but it is easy to imagine that the poetess understood her zodiac sign in relation to Uranus as an invitation to pursue her own relation to the forces of eternity.

Like many of her generation, Irma Gohl pursued parallel pathways, trying out several approaches simultaneously without giving up one for the other. In addition to astronomy, she enrolled in a course on Orientalism, in which she was taught Egyptology and Arabic literature. On reading the

Quran she experienced a shivering, elated state, ‘a light shone in my soul’ (Gohl 1932: 58). This she understood to be the sign she had been looking for all along, bestowing on her the sudden revelation of some divine presence. Next, an Egyptian student at Munich University whose government had sent him to study Orientalism in Germany, taught her ‘the true spirit of Islam’, in terms of what she described as a mix of ethics and practical behaviour. The student, Muhamad Sayed Abd-Elaal (dates unknown), also advised her to write to Sheikh M. Abdullah, imam of the mosque in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, which is what she did.

In 1931, after a thorough study of Islam, she presented herself at the mosque in person with a request to speak the Muslim creed, not in a quiet moment but in a highly audible and visible manner, as an announcement to the public at large. She must have made quite an impression because memories of the ceremony survive in the *Moslemische Revue*, in the imam’s private photo collection, and in a description of the mosque’s history by the Ahmadiyya chronicler Nasir Ahmad (2006: 33; LAB n.d.-a).

The occasion the imam deemed worthy to offer her was the official reception of the Druze Sheikh Shakib Arslan (1869–1946), secretary general of the Syrian–Palestinian Congress at the League of Nations in Geneva, to which the Muslim ambassadors in Berlin and the German minister of culture were also invited. Her transition from one world to the other thus became a widely visible affair that was also broadcast on the radio. As Ahmad (2006: 33) reported it:

In early 1931, the German Muslim Society hosted a tea party in honour of Shakib Arslan during his visit to the mosque. Among the distinguished guests were the Afghan and Iranian ambassadors and the Berlin Minister of Culture, who paid tribute to the Jamaat’s activities in spreading Islam. This year, a one-hour program on Eid al-Fitr was broadcast on the radio throughout Germany for the first time. On this occasion, a PhD student at the University of Munich embraced Islam; she was given the Muslim name Safiyah.

During the ceremony, Irma took the Muslim name Safiyah, ‘the Radiant One’. In her account of her conversion, Gohl (1932: 59) describes how becoming a Muslim immediately filled her with light and made her soul radiate:

It felt like ... an ocean of ecstasy, like the dawn announcing a new day. And as my name Safiyah means rays, so now flames radiate through my soul and call out loudly as with tongs of fire: 'You peoples of the earth! Gather under the sign of the crescent moon!'

In this way, Irma Gohl's search for light ended in a cosmic experience in which the study of the stars mixed with the knowledge of Oriental religions. Figure 9.2, from Sheikh M. Abdullah's private album, shows her posing for the official photograph in front of the mosque after the ceremony, alongside the imam and the official guests.



Fig. 9.2 After the conversion ceremony. Seated left to right: Irma Safiyah Gohl, S. M. Abdullah, the ambassadors of Afghanistan and Iran and the German minister of culture. (Source: LAB D Rep 920-16/Photos Nr. 9)

THE CONVERT REGISTER

Irma Gohl's life plan can be described as thoroughly modern (Gumbrecht 1978: 26). To escape the German dilemma, she turned to Eastern religions that had become fashionable since the nineteenth century. Unlike previous generations, who organized themselves into theosophical lodges to access all the foreign religions (see below), she made unorthodox connections. She attached cosmic mathematics to fantasy rockets, chained astrological secrets to Egyptian hieroglyphics, and used the Quran to achieve an out-of-body experience. Since ecstasy was the exit, Irma Gohl turned her parents' ambition for her to become a professional woman on its head and instead developed a bricolage of religious individualization. In addition to the strange, she also built on speed and grasped everything that crossed her path. She finally found the rapturous state she sought in Islam because it was, as she put it, 'the most positive of all religions' (Gohl 1932: 59). As we shall see, she was not the only one who acted as she did.

So much for Irma Gohl's life path, but how did it differ from the life paths of her peers? While most of the sources for this information have already been mentioned, before they are consulted, it might be useful to recall that, in his role as imam, Sheikh M. Abdullah had carefully kept a register in which the names and dates of all the converts who had gone through the ceremony were entered. While the new Muslim would be given the original certificate to take home, a copy of each was filed in the mosque archive, and each bore a number. Among the early converts, the certificate of the president of the community, Hugo Marcus, was number 23 (Abdullah 1925); and painter Lisa Oettinger was number 81 (Abdullah 1933). In 1935, the imam wrote in an internal report that he had counted a total of 106 'New Muslims' alongside 400 'friends'.² In the following year, during a police raid that turned the mosque upside down, the register was confiscated, never to be returned.³ However, because some conversion documents survived in private archives, we are familiar with their design and what information they contained (Fig. 9.3).

² 'How many Germans embraced Islam in our mosque? In the past, we depended on estimates, but I think we estimated correctly. Today we keep a register, so everybody can convince himself that we are long past 100. In fact, we count 400 friends and 106 German Muslims' (Abdullah 1935).

³ To establish a person's 'race', the *Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung* collected genealogical data, for which conversion and marriage registers offered important sources (Ehrenreich 2007).



Fig. 9.3 Lisa Oettinger’s conversion certificate (Courtesy Landesarchiv Berlin, D Rep. 920-16 Photos, 77)

We thus know that throughout the 1930s, a trickle of conversions were bolstering the mosque community. We encounter life reformers on the left of the political spectrum alongside conservatives and Nazis on the right. Also, in the frenzy following Germany’s declaration of war on the rest of Europe, young recruits would convert to Islam just before parting for the front, leaving another trickle in the mosque archive. Numbers were never spectacularly high, but they rose steadily. On returning to Berlin in 1947, Sheikh M. Abdullah could announce that shortly before the war, the mosque had counted a total of 206 ‘New Muslims’ along with 600 ‘friends’ (NN 1947).

It is important to recall that the mosque in Berlin-Wilmersdorf was only one of many places in which Germans could become Muslims. In Berlin, the Ottoman, Afghan, and Persian embassies were popular venues, as were the Islamic Community of Berlin and the Islamic Institute. French scholar Bernard Vernier (dates unknown), who travelled through Germany in 1938 studying the position of Muslims in that country, found that about 2000 Germans had converted to Islam in 1938 alone (Vernier 1939: 38). Apart from Berlin, Vernier names Vienna (*Islamischer Kulturbund*) and Munich (*Islamischer Studentenbund*) as hotspots for conversion. Finally, some of those who had met at the Berlin Mosque travelled to North Africa and the Middle East in search of an ‘authentic’ Oriental mosque in which to convert.

Whatever their path, what marks these seekers as a group is their inner search for ‘truth’ and the highly unorthodox patchwork they forged to find it. This distinguished them from people who embraced Islam for political reasons, either to support the colonial struggle or because they bought the Nazi view of Islam as a religious warrior religion (Jonker 2020: 182–211; Motadel 2017). While politics seemed largely to have taken place outside the mosque, strong pro-Nazi sentiments nonetheless developed, even among the non-political Orientalists who gathered there.⁴

Tracing them was a complex task. Of the men and women who gave the *Moslemische Revue* their photo and/or their conversion report, so were therefore affiliated to the mosque and German Muslim Society, we counted a total of thirty-three names. However, these only partly overlapped with the names in the correspondence between the German Muslim Society and the Berlin-Wilmersdorf registry office recording attendances of board members at their annual meetings. A census revealed a further twenty-two names (LAB n.d.-b). The conversion certificates and field numbers of the German recruits who hastily converted to Islam before leaving for the front tended to be scattered here and there. We were able to locate about a third of the 206 German Muslims whom Abdullah claimed had belonged to his community before the Second World War. Group photos in front of the mosque suggest that there were more women than men.

⁴On 31 August 1936, Sheikh M. Abdullah wrote to the Foreign Office: ‘Our President Mr. Boosfeld is a member of the Opfer-Kreis of the NSDAP. Our second secretary Dr. Klopp von Hofe is a member of the NSDAP and SS. The treasurer Mr. Schubert is a member of the Arbeitsfront, and first assessor Mr. Beyer is a member of the NSDAP’ (Abdullah 1936). An attempt to align Islam with national socialism was clearly underway (Fischer 1934).

Determining people's ages was another challenge. Sometimes birth dates are given in conversion reports, as well as in the few obituaries of deceased members found scattered throughout the journal, but often enough not. Wherever members appear only in lists, there is no way of knowing how old they were when they joined the community. In a few cases, information from private archives could fill the gaps. Regarding age, the photos provided by the private photo albums are our best informants (LAB Berlin n.d.-c).

When you look at these photos, you see the faces of very young people. In the journal, they are pictured both individually and in the community. The private photo albums show groups of friends on outings, praying together in the mosque or celebrating a wedding. Together, they suggest that while not every convert in the mosque was from the generation born around 1900, the majority were young. Older members were rare and can be counted on two hands. They include Albert Seiler (1876–1937), Johanna Schneider (b.1867), Emilia Oettinger (1876–1954), Hugo Marcus (1880–1946), and Amin Boosfeld (1880–1937). Since detailed records of some of these lives exist, these will help in identifying differences between the generation of 1900 and the previous one.

PARALLEL EXPERIENCES

When the First World War ended, Hanns Lohbauer was 22; Rolf Ehrenfels 17; Hildegard Scharf 14; Irma Gohl and Egon Greifelt 12; Lisa Oettinger 10 and her sister Susanna only 8. Lohbauer was in the trenches during the First World War, an experience that shook him and intensified his urge to 'find the truth' (Lohbauer 1926). Susanna Oettinger, by comparison, with her down-to-earth material interest in things spiritual, seemed more settled (Jonker 2018: 123–7). For the purposes of this chapter, these two actors were taken as the outer limits of the age group under consideration. It is unclear how much of the chaos and disobedience that broke out in the aftermath of the defeat they experienced, but at some point, they all searched for words to express their loss. Hanns Lohbauer put his 'shivering soul' on record (Lohbauer 1926). Egon Greifelt (dates unknown) used the word 'trembling' (Greifelt 1924), Herman Khalid Banning (b.1890) spoke of 'shame' (Banning 1925), and Lisa Oettinger never tired of reciting Goethe's famous poem about the elf king—'Who drives there so late through the dark, gloomy night? It is a father and his child so dear' (Jonker 2018: 177–208).

Whatever drove them, they all took steps towards trying to escape their emotional torment, and the phases through which Irma Gohl passed were fairly characteristic of most. Each contained three stages—turning towards the self, confronting the alien, and linking deep emotional experiences with proximity to the divine. In passing through these phases successfully, speed seemed to have been of the essence.

Between 1924 and 1939, the *Moslemische Revue* published almost eighty articles written by German Muslims. The first-person narratives were mainly published in the 1920s when the people concerned were still young. Over time, the contents changed, and later autobiographical accounts can still be found.

Incidentally, the explorations of the self under consideration here make for difficult reading. In these texts, dots, dashes, brackets, and semicolons serve to mark the unspeakable, sometimes to convey to readers that a soul is wrestling on the edge of the abyss, sometimes that the merging with the divine, the deepest of feelings, cannot be put into words. To call these contributions exalted would be an understatement. On their way to the *mysterium tremendum* that awaited them at the end, the writers carefully hinted at their feelings with the typography at their disposal. The literary technique, already used by nineteenth-century writers, offered the seekers a ready-made tool with which to express themselves (Kammasch 2009).

In his contribution ‘On the Way: A Confession’, a text saturated with whole regiments of dots and dashes, Hanns Lohbauer started with the observation that people usually consult maps to orient themselves when they plan a journey. But, on their way to death, he muses, nobody seems to know the way (Lohbauer 1927: 37). The writer navigates magnetism, spiritualism, Buddhism, and Hinduism to find that hidden road. Finding that insufficient, he also contemplates the eternal cycle of fire and gas, compression and cooling down, earth, stone, and life. What keeps it all together, or so he concludes, is the energy that swings from the below to the above, from Man to the spiritual. Lohbauer (1927) calls this energy ‘prayer’. For him, it presents the escape route.

Based on *Gestalt* therapy, Rolf Ehrenfels (1930) took a similar path. Rolf Omar Baron von Ehrenfels (1901–80) grew up in a Prague household in which *Gestalt* was a common theme, and of which his father Christian von Ehrenfels (1859–1932) was an architect. Belonging to the wide field of psychoanalysis, *Gestalt* follows the theory that the sum of the parts presents a different outcome from the parts themselves (Ehrenfels 1890). In line with this, Christian von Ehrenfels also developed a grand

vision of the ‘religion of the future’ being an opera. In a radio broadcast, he declared that God himself would conduct the opera, performing a cosmic drama that would leave the Wagner operas far behind. Even his experimental listeners found this too much, which is how we interpret the many questions to the newspapers about whether Ehrenfels planned to write the opera himself (Ehrenfels 1929).

More prudently, the son tried to achieve unity with the divine by means of sacred architecture, an experiment for which he chose the great mosque of Istanbul as a vehicle. Sitting on the venerable carpets, he allowed himself to be uplifted by ‘the organic dimensions and rhythms of the ornament’, ‘the sober ascending lines’ and ‘the silence of the dome’. Floating higher and higher and losing himself in architectural details that almost eluded his gaze, he finally felt ‘his senses flying upwards like iron filings’ (Ehrenfels 1930). Iron filings? According to Rolf Ehrenfels’s understanding of *Gestalt*, a magnet beyond his field of vision inevitably pulled up the superfluous parts of his inner self and transformed them into something completely different.

Like Irma Gohl’s path, these spiritual journeys led inexorably upwards, from the bottom to the top, from the profane to the sacred, from the cursed to the blessed, from darkness to light. What was it that the seekers so desperately wanted to escape? Apart from describing bitter and gloomy feelings at the beginning of the path, Lohbauer never went into detail about what had actually happened down there but had conversations with the dead. Rolf Ehrenfels preferred to leave familiar geography behind for his search and seek out a place that was foreign to him and one onto which he could freely project.

Saladin Schütz (dates unknown) called this method ‘Orientalization’, which he practised with great pleasure (Schütz 1929). Whenever Schütz applied the term, it indicated a steamy mixture of adapting to one’s surroundings—preferably in or near a mosque in North Africa or the Middle East—and simultaneously experiencing a thousand-and-one-night feelings. By confusing his private longing with the world outside, he thought the Orient was ‘a fairy tale’. Other travellers to the Orient, such as Hans Ellenberg (1877–1949), an Orientalist and much-respected speaker at the mosque in Berlin, seem to have used the same technique (Ellenberg 1929). Abdullah Robert (dates unknown) initially turned to the Hindu way of life, but its rich and opulent forms proved too much for him. Longing for clarity, he too fell in love with the sober forms of a mosque (Robert 1930).

Unlike the men, the women scoured the literature and looked for a ‘real’ Muslim who could give them the information they needed. Their goal seems to have been emotional, professional, and financial independence as modern women. In this respect, Irma Gohl can be placed in a series with Hildegard Scharf (dates unknown), Johanna Schneider (1867–1938), Dorothea Schumacher (dates unknown), Maryam Hesselbach (dates unknown), and others (Schneider et al. 1931; Schumacher 1932). Latifa Roessler (dates unknown), who had studied Eastern religions and married a Muslim, did not see the Muslim world as a fairy tale, but quite the opposite, as a ‘field of work for European Muslim woman’, the modern woman in intercultural marriage who could bring the blessings of ‘European civilization’ to the ignorant (Roessler 1934).

Emilia Oettinger and her daughters Lisa and Susanna read about the mosque in the daily newspaper and befriended the Abdullah family for the rest of their lives. Lisa Oettinger embarked on an Oriental journey and travelled from Berlin via Sarajevo, Istanbul, Jerusalem, and Baghdad to Lahore with her fiancé, Assistant Imam Aziz ur-Rahman Mirza (1904–37). When Lisa saw the veiled women of Sarajevo, the Orient had begun. As she perceived the misery and backwardness of the women and thought about what kind of lives they had to lead, she wondered for the first time in this adventure what would await her at the other end of the journey (Jonker 2018: 177–208).

What bonded the seekers of the 1900 generation was the patchwork they created to achieve that sublime feeling they called ecstasy, which they saw as the vehicle with which to free themselves from the family and societal conventions that still held them down. This was the elusive state imagined as merging with blinding light, merging with the magnet called ‘God’ or flying up to it. The descriptions vary. What they have in common is the intense appropriation of the foreign through creating a binary code that the seekers recognized as the essential crossroads to that goal. Using pairs of words like down/up, dark/light, and profane/sacred, the crossings represented the moment when the seekers entered another landscape of the soul, a hidden place where ‘it’ was about to happen and which only they could perceive. For them, the essence of religious communication was a form of transgression, a way of going beyond the known world, what sociologists of religion call transcendence.

When discussing Irma Gohl's biography, I indicated that this was the decisive moment when the seekers could loosen not only the shackles of ecclesiastical or synagogical traditions, but also everything that hindered them in terms of family conventions. With this act, they were on the cutting edge, even if sociologists of religion do not consider this time to have come until later. Thomas Luckmann, who observed forms of (Christian) religiosity around 1960, noted that 'in the social form of religion now emerging in modern industrial societies, potential consumers have direct access to an assortment of religious representations, ... which makes religion a phenomenon of the private sphere' (Luckmann 1967: 146). Looking at Christian youth in the 1980s, Peter Beyer (2006: 299–301) identified crossroad codes as the core of modern religiosity. The explorations of the self presented in this contribution locate their beginning in the turbulent world after the end of the First World War, when Germans were searching in multiple directions for answers to pressing questions, thus creating an ever-increasing tension between them.

The religious explorations studied here show how the seekers of the generation around 1900 ventured into the unknown and operated without the conventional demarcations that characterize established religion. There were no well-worn liturgies with readings, movements, songs, and prayers for them. There was no dress code, dogma, or institutional structure, and nothing external to guide them. Instead, they explored the terminology of movement, paths, trails and itineraries. Once on the road, nothing was certain except the moment of crossing, followed by the final realization, which the texts confirm consists of chills, goosebumps, lightning, and blinding light. Hanns Lohbauer (1926: 36) described the search for this uncertain destination as an 'essentially limitless cross of paths leading high into the sky and into the depths of history, further, further still'.

The other characteristic distinguishing them as a group was their impatience to achieve this state. When reading these texts, one does not encounter leisurely walks with interesting vistas, as the previous generation did (see below). Rather, the explorations give the impression that there is no time to lose. Irma Gohl's rocket metaphor conjures up the image of a rapid ride to the powers of the universe. Hanns Lohbauer makes his way through a feverish landscape of souls, trying to free himself from the powers of the underworld. Hans Ellenberg, Rolf Ehrenfels, and Saladin Schütz were restless travellers who sought to get lost in foreign landscapes. But whatever the vehicle, it had to be now.

THE 1880 GENERATION

A short view of the experiences of the previous generation corroborates this. To illustrate their otherness, the biography of Albert Seiler (1876–1937), a Lutheran Christian bookkeeper in the imperial mint in Berlin, is narrated in some detail.

Seiler was of stable Lutheran stock, baptized and confirmed in the dome in the centre of Berlin, the church where the emperors lay buried, and that the Kaiser himself attended. At a young age, he took a lively interest in the activities of his parish, especially ‘in our mission in the German colonies’ (Seiler 1933: 31). Here, he heard about the existence of foreign religions for the first time in his life. Next, the Association of Young Christian Men set him on the track of theosophy, encouraging him to learn ‘about the religions of all peoples and ages’ (Seiler 1933: 30). For the rest of his life, foreign religions became Albert Seiler’s hobby. For forty years he tried to feel what others felt in the Catholic, Greek-Orthodox, Methodist, and Mennonite Churches, sharing time with the Salvation Army, the Christian Scientists, the Serious Bible Scholars, and the Jewish-Christian Witnesses to Israel. He visited Mazdaznan, Jewish, Baha’i, Freethinker, and Monist meetings, but Albert Seiler never thought of leaving his own church.

In 1912 he was baptized again by the Latter-day Saints by submerging himself three times in the muddy waters of the Spree. In doing so, he reaffirmed his Christian faith in the city of his birth. Albert Seiler was, above all, a Berliner and a Lutheran. In 1923, he joined Berlin’s Muslim community, not to change his Lutheran affiliation but to live up to his conviction that ‘Islam is the oldest Protestantism’ (Seiler 1933: 35). Albert Seiler appropriated the foreign by recognizing ‘the other’ as part of his own and by incorporating the Muslim into the Christian tradition. One searches in vain for urgency in his life’s journey. Rather, he described his adventures as ‘spiritual wanderings’ and towards the end of his life expressed deep satisfaction about the ‘wonderful path on which I have been led’ (Seiler 1933: 30).

Albert Seiler’s path is similar to that of his contemporaries in the mosque community. Johanna Schneider (b.1867), who wanted to continue her beloved Christian tradition, embraced Islam ‘as a member of the Christian church’ (Schneider et al. 1931: 56). Emily Oettinger (b.1874), who embraced a mixture of hiking, vegetarianism, sunbathing and nude swimming before meeting Imam Abdullah, became a ‘friend’ of the

mosque and supported the community without feeling the need to convert (Jonker 2018: 63–93). Hugo Marcus (b.1880) regarded Islam as a continuation of the Jewish faith. Being simultaneously ‘German, Jewish, Muslim and gay’ did not bother him. Only when the Gestapo forced him to leave the Jewish community did he demand his exit papers (Baer 2020; Jonker 2020: 129–51). The generation of the 1880s was far more relaxed about life. Continuity is the term that fits all their biographies. Reading their narratives, one gets the impression that they were never particularly inclined to seek out-of-body experiences. All they wanted was to embellish their lives, gain certain personal freedom and deepen their understanding of the world outside the boundaries of their own religion (Bigalke 2016: 145–246).

DEBATING THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

What did the gentlemen from Lahore think of the spiritual adventures under their roof? After all, they had taken the initiative by travelling to Europe, building a mosque and ‘conversing’ with Europeans. Whatever they expected of them, the people they attracted were of a very special disposition, combining German romanticism and Orientalism with the desire to free themselves from a German condition that was stifling them. How did these missionaries deal with the seekers, and to what end?

Maulvi Sadruddin was the first Muslim missionary sent to Europe by his Ahmadiyya headquarters in Lahore. He had previously studied education at the University of Lahore and worked as a lecturer. He was a religious layman who aspired to reform the Muslim tradition, which he saw as hopelessly outdated. With this goal in mind, he came to Europe to establish a network of loyal friends and partners and to discuss the issue that was high on the agenda of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement, namely the future of religion. Sadruddin was a man with a mission. While overseeing the mosque’s construction on the outskirts of West Berlin, on 1 April 1924, he launched the mission journal *Moslemische Revue*, in which he introduced himself to the Berlin public with a photograph. It features a man with a determined face, framed by gold-rimmed spectacles and a gold-threaded turban, sitting arm in arm with two German Muslims and bearing the subtitle of ‘East and West united in Islam’ (Fig. 9.4).

The missionary who had come to Berlin only the year before could not have guessed that the men he was embracing were two mutually exclusive opposites who would soon polarize his mosque community and all of



Fig. 9.4 East and West United in Islam. From left to right: Manfred Freiherr von Killinger, Maulvi Sadruddin, Herman Khalid Banning. The caption reads, ‘Der Osten und der Westen vereinigt im Islam’ (Courtesy Landesarchiv Berlin, D Rep. 920-16, 42)

Europe. Manfred Freiherr von Killinger (1886–1944), a senior naval officer, had become a Muslim while stationed in the Middle East during the First World War. He supported the Nazi revolution, became a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) in 1931 and joined the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) about ten years later (Sprenger 2019). On the other hand, Attorney General Herman Khalid Banning converted to Islam after the First World War as a protest against Zionism in Palestine. He died in 1927, a Jew who upheld the traditions and decency of Prussian Germany (Banning 1925).

But whoever came knocking, Sadruddin had a way of introducing Islam to Germans that was seductive precisely because it offered a wide-open door that was completely unobtrusive. In every issue of the journal, he placed the following statement (see, e.g., Sadruddin 1925):

Becoming a Muslim requires no ceremony. Islam is not only a rational, widespread, and practical religion, it is also fully in tune with the natural human disposition. Every child is born with it. Therefore, there is no need

for conversion to become a Muslim. One can be a Muslim without telling anyone. The profession of Islam is only a formality for the organization. The basic creed of the Islamic faith is: There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his messenger.

This missionary was not promoting the profound change his parishioners were trying to impose. On the contrary, the Ahmadiyya mission from Lahore believed that Germans interested in Islam had always been Muslims, regardless of their religious upbringing and political convictions. They only needed to acknowledge it. Therefore, no ceremony, conversion, or even confession was required to join the community. Instead, visitors were offered the option to ‘be Muslim without telling anyone’. To reinforce this option, Sadruddin also introduced a status of religious affiliation that was a novelty in Germany, that of ‘friend’ of the community. Lowering the threshold in a country where one had to be baptized and confirmed before being accepted as a church member, was indeed a new approach.

Given the steadily growing number of ‘friends’ and ‘New Muslims’ Sheikh M. Abdullah mentioned at various points, the missionaries’ approach seemed to have been successful. Rather like modern mass parties with their surplus of sympathizers, the circle of friends provided the necessary creative sediment. A broad spectrum of knowledge, ideas and viewpoints emerged—from Judaism to Christianity, from left to right, from male to female. In this way, the debate in their mosque acted like a great combine harvester, collecting everything useful for the missionaries’ goal of reforming Islam.

For the debate on the future of religion, which his successor Sheikh M. Abdullah began, the broad German involvement in the mosque soon bore fruit. Like Sadruddin, Abdullah was a religious layman, a physicist by profession, who enrolled at Berlin University after his arrival to complete his dissertation in chemistry. Endowed with a cool and methodical mind, he never spoke much himself. He let others have their say and carefully collected their thoughts and texts for further evaluation. The traces he left in the mosque archives reveal the movements of a good organizer and an even better communicator. He kept correspondence, drew up lists of members, guests and possible speakers, and selected Quranic verses to accompany each topic.

His preferred topic was the future shape of religion, and it fell on fertile ground. In German religious circles, the future of religion had been

topical since the mid-nineteenth century (see Mathias Thurner in this volume). For the rest of the century, Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews used the topic to discuss internal reforms in their own communities. With the rise of theosophy in the 1880s, the debate lost its traditional moorings. Until then, it had attracted outsiders, speculative philosophers like Christian von Ehrenfels and German Buddhists who recommended Buddhism as the appropriate model for national socialism (Zotz 2017). So, when Abdullah initiated a debate on the future of religion in 1930, he was moving on old, well-trodden religious terrain.

What was significant about the Ahmadiyya approach was that the debate compared neither holy texts nor religious thought traditions, as is often the case in inter-religious debates today. Instead, participants searched for the exact spot in which to embed Islam in European civilization or, in the language of that time, the place where East and West could be ‘fused’ or ‘moulded’ together. Both Indians and Germans agreed that, for such an intimate measure, only the soul could qualify.

Because it was intimate, the participants were also unanimous in this respect. The president of the German Muslim Society, Hugo Marcus, made a head start in 1930 with his article, ‘The Religion and Man of the Future’, suggesting that a merging of souls would only take place ‘in the sacred sphere of erotic experience’ (Marcus 1930). The following year, Rolf Ehrenfels (1931), who experienced religious ecstasy in an Istanbul mosque, extended this to ‘the phenomenological participation of the human body in interiors and architecture’. In contrast to these speakers, Johanna Schneider (1932) emphasized an approach to the divine that was at the core of the Christian experience, namely the contemplation of suffering.

The person who propelled the debate, however, was neither German nor Indian. Born in Iran in 1884, Hosseyn Kazemzadeh (1884–1962), called *Iranschähr* (Land of Iran), attracted the largest audience (Jonker 2016: 91 ff.). Originally a Persian revolutionary in the service of German war propaganda, after the First World War had become a thing of the past Kazemzadeh stayed in Berlin and became a Sufi master. He quickly rose through the ranks of the Inayat Sufi lodge, joined a theosophical lodge (Behnam 2006), and developed a heady religious vocabulary that glossed over cultural differences. After he became famous as a Sufi master, he spoke in the mosque on topics that were balm for the souls of seekers. His talks included topics such as ‘The Healing Power of Silence’ (1930), ‘The Master and his Followers’ (1931), ‘How Shall We Meditate?’ (1932),

‘Rumi’ (1933), ‘The Life of a Sufi Master’ (1935), and ‘Know and Desire Your Soul’ (1935).

As a missionary produced by the local situation, Kazemzadeh was able to tap into the complicated emotions that dominated interwar Berlin. His contribution to the debate was to integrate the breadth of religious experimentation into the mosque community. In doing so, he did not specifically address a German audience. Rather, amid acute political strife, he sought to transform ‘Aryans’ from East and West, be they Persian, Indian or German, into a chosen people who would fuse their bodies and souls to create that novel human species called ‘New Man’.

Kazemzadeh’s appearances at the mosque must have been a godsend for the Ahmadiyya missionaries, for ‘self-purification’ and intermarriage were their chosen means of transferring Western tradition to the ‘wisdom of the East’. When he left Berlin in 1936 to install his own *école mystique ésotérique* in Switzerland, he took the debate with him, propagating personal renewal and world harmony against all odds.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have traced the lives of Germans who sought spiritual escape after the First World War. In the process, they created highly unorthodox religious mixes in which early forms of religious individualization and crossovers between Christianity and Islam played a part. The Ahmadiyya from Lahore, who were looking for ways to reform their own religion, were instrumental in bringing Islam within the reach of Germans. With their help, Islam was included in the German package of ‘Eastern wisdom’, a popular speculative field that played an important role in appropriating foreign traditions.

The sources consulted for this story revealed that the missionaries and the missionized represented two perspectives. From the missionaries’ viewpoint, members of the Indian-educated elite needed to go to Berlin after the First World War to find friends and allies and to develop lasting structures for the future independence of their country. Among the many invitations to the German public to join the Indian cause, theirs took the form of a religious calling. Equipped with a thorough secular education, the Ahmadiyya missionaries wanted to reform the Muslim tradition and sought the help of German intellectuals to discuss where East and West might best benefit from each other. They practised a policy of inclusion and kept the threshold low.

The German perspective on the mission was different. While the Indians sought to serve the goals of the future Indian nation, the German seekers interpreted their offer as an escape route. While the mission aimed to attract the German intelligentsia, it gathered around it a young generation in search of a way out of the misery stifling their lives. While the missionaries tried to develop a religion of the future that would serve global aims, their German friends took this as an invitation to enter highly individualistic, soul-searching terrain. While the Germans used the German language to try to express the inexpressible, the Lahore Ahmadiyya missionaries promoted the rational language of secular Islam (Datla 2013).

That more German women than men felt drawn to the attractions of the missions meant that they probably sought the religious experience to assert their independence as modern women. Lisa Oettinger described Islam as the most rational, Irma Gohl as the most positive of all religions. Latifa Roessler even saw a ‘work field for the European Muslim woman’. How did these women use their conversion to Islam to promote their independence? A final look at Irma Gohl’s life after her conversion may provide a tentative answer to this question.

In her last letter to the American Guild, dated 4 May 1939, Irma Gohl described her life as a writer in the Australian outback as one of extreme poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion. She asked the guild to help her approach at least one German publisher and said that she was working on a volume of poetry, short stories, a screenplay, and a novel on the theme of ‘human rights’. ‘If I could publish one of these manuscripts’, she wrote, ‘that would be a prerequisite for me to continue working. Could you help me in this regard?’ (Heuser 1939c). Despite the guild’s refusal, Irma Gohl was not discouraged.

In 1943, she described her situation to the magistrate of her parish. By this time her typewriter was already broken, so she wrote by hand at weekends while doing war work in Brisbane during the week. She was asking the magistrate for permission to move to Brisbane so that she could finish a manuscript that had been ‘as good as accepted’ by a publisher in Sydney (Heuser 1943). The letter portrayed a woman who coolly set out the steps that were necessary to support the war effort and, at the same time, meet the demands of a writer who had to support her family. What happened to this manuscript, we do not know, but a year later we see Irma Gohl putting her signature to a letter to the League of Nations (LAB 1944). The other signatory is none other than Muhamad Sayed Abd-Elaal, the student at the University of Munich who taught her the spirit of Islam. Despite the war, they must have found ways to build working relationships. The letter contained a precise account of the Italian genocide in

Tripoli. It enumerated the atrocities and the number of victims, and named the Muslim dignitaries and ambassadors who corroborated the report's contents. It is an impressive document that miraculously survived in the stacks of the mosque's archive. It is also evidence of the huge efforts she put into breaking through the lies of an aggressive, warmongering country that disguised its atrocities as legitimate military action.

The scant facts reveal that the single-mindedness with which Irma Safiyah Gohl strove for the 'truth', culminating in a metamorphosis of the self, was transformed to assert herself as a professional woman in a hostile environment. Her appropriation of a foreign religion seemed to have consolidated her position and helped her strengthen her resilience. It is one of the miracles of the twentieth century that Indian Muslims from Lahore were able to support her in this quest.

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