

D I S K U S

The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions (www.basr.ac.uk)
ISSN: 0967-8948

Diskus 14 (2013): 95-125

<http://www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/diskus14/renger.pdf>

The Allure of the “Master”. Critical Assessments of a Term and Narrative

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Almut-Barbara Renger
Freie Universitaet Berlin
Department of History and Cultural Studies
Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion
Gosslerstr. 2–4
D – 14195 Berlin
Germany
renger@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Abstract:

In many cultures and religions around the world, past and present, a relationship with a so-called “master” has been a model for the transfer of, and initiation into, particular forms of knowledge. Even among scholars, explorations of this theme have not infrequently been marked by an idealising use of the noun “master” and derivatives, most strikingly in Joachim Wach’s pioneering study “Master and Disciple”, but also in more recent works in other scholarly disciplines. This tendency greatly hampers work with the terminology as a metalinguistic apparatus for analysing what is meant and described by it. Accordingly, the present article explores the relational character of the “master” terminology, and introduces a number of stages in the history of its employment. Examples of its idealisation in scholarship show why it has so far proved untenable as a general heuristic category in the academic field of the study of religions.

Keywords:

“master”, master-disciple relationship, knowledge transfer, (self-)exaltation, idealisation, “master narrative”

In many cultures around the world, both past and present, an individual or a group’s relationship with a so-called ‘master’ has provided a common model for the transfer of knowledge. As such, the model forms part of a social and cultural reality that is established and consolidated by rules and parameters, and thereby functions as a ‘cultural guardian’.

Sometimes the relationship generates a subculture within a wider social context, where particular values of a cultural tradition are displayed in an especially intense and concentrated form. One of the defining features of the relationship is that the ‘master’ claims for himself authority and the capacity for leadership and teaching, while being simultaneously accorded those same qualities and abilities by his followers. Also there is typically more going on than just the imparting of knowledge or instruction in practices. Often the desired purpose of the relationship is to bring about some transformation of the followers. For this reason, there are interventions on the subject’s way of living as well as initiations (or at least processes akin to initiations). These are always dependent on the socio-cultural background of the tradition within which the relationship forms.

Religion in particular abounds with figures endowed with ‘master’ status by virtue of particular resources, means and qualities regarded as helpful or even essential to revelation and salvation. Such figures are found for instance in present-day Hinduism, Indian shamanism, Buddhism, Taoism and among the indigenous peoples of the Americas just as they were in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, for instance in pagan antiquity, Christianity, Judaism and Islam (see e.g. Sartory and Sartory 1981, 9–104; Müller 1988; Rigopoulos 2007). The designations, titles and forms of address for these special experts are very diverse: *guru*, *lama*, *roshi*, *shīfu*, *sheikh*, *murshid*, *zaddiq*, *rabbi*, *starets*, and so forth. They all have particular implications, governed by confession or tradition, and are also used to express respect, awe, or veneration. Sometimes, their use is subject to official authorisation. In the linguistic and cultural sphere of the so-called West, the term ‘master’ is used as well (or instead), a word derived from the Latin *magister* (see below). Religious teachers not authorised as part of an organisational structure also frequently call themselves ‘master’. Such figures often populate the periphery of a tradition or have dissociated themselves from it. Not uncommonly they combine elements from different traditions.

When referring to those who enter into a relationship with such religious specialists, the term ‘disciple(ship)’ taken from the followers of Jesus (on the term, see Jaffee 2005), is often used in allusion to their devotion and close emotional bond. In religions other than Christianity, the application of the term ‘disciple’ is generally defined against the term ‘student’ in order to denote a higher degree of submission, admiration and commitment. The first significant investigation of the disciple-student distinction was conducted by Joachim Wach in his two-part work *Master and Disciple* (German 1925 [English 1962]). Wach essentially uses the term “master” to denote religious specialists who take on a founding role. The first part of his work compares the relationship of teacher and student on the one hand with that of master and disciple on the other. The second part presents various master figures and types of disciples who surround them.

Since its examination by Wach, leaving aside theology and the phenomenology of religion, the master issue has relatively seldom been the subject of scholarly study in a pan-cultural perspective, in spite of the real importance of the issue and related concepts in many cultural contexts (especially religious ones). The reasons for this are many, but two are of particular significance. *Firstly*, the starting-point for Wach was that of the intimate community around Jesus portrayed in the New Testament. On this basis, he derived his “master” concept from founder religions established by charismatic personalities (such as Jesus or Buddha) and hence also his understanding of the term “disciple”. In this framework, a “master” has no “students”; only the “teacher” has “students”. Wach’s artificial distinction and dichotomisation continues to be used; among German-speaking scholars, for instance, directly following Wach came Gustav Mensching’s *Soziologie der Religion* (1947: 167–180) and Kurt Goldammer’s *Formenwelt des Religiösen* (1960: 169–174). It can also still be found in the United States, for example in Huston Smith’s lecture “The Master-Disciple Relationship” (2005). A *second* important reason for the persistence of this dichotomy is the long-standing use of the noun

“master” and derivatives like “to master”, “masterly”, “masterpiece” and so on throughout the arts and sciences as terms of idealisation and praise. In his pioneering study, Wach himself provides a good example of the allure of the term “master” and its uncritical use, just as more recent explorations of the theme in other disciplines do much the same. Such a tendency greatly hampers work with the terminology as a metalinguistic apparatus for analysing what is meant and described by it.

The present paper distances itself from Wach’s dichotomy and from the attitudes and explanations which continue and consolidate the idealisation of what we will here call the *narrative of the ‘master’*, a narrative, moreover, that constantly implements itself in new and different ways. It by no means occurs only in the field of religion, but rather across a much wider cultural spectrum. Scholarship is not immune to it either, even the scholarly study of religion. The message it conveys, emphasised by reiteration and expressed with a broad repertoire of nuance, is that when a particular individual *rises* to greatness in a field, this brings with it *superiority* and hence authority over those implicitly considered *beneath* and *subject* to him: an authority which, even if not explicitly religious in origin, recalls the relationship between God and Man.

It is this narrative of the ‘master’ that will be addressed below, as particular aspects are selected from the broad spectrum of available perspectives on the ‘master’ complex. Special attention will be paid to the relational nature of the ‘master’ terminology, as revealed by etymology, and some moments in the history of the word’s use will be outlined. Examples of the idealising use of the noun ‘master’ in scholarship also show why to date it has proved untenable as a general heuristic category in the scientific study of religions.

1 The *narrative of the ‘master’* and the quest for ‘self-exaltation’

One vital element in the attraction of master figures and the concept of mastery is the

fascination that authority, greatness and exceptional status exert upon many people. Such people seek to align themselves with outstanding personalities whom they admire. They strive to realise ideals which they project upon them, seeking refuge in a role model with whom they are able to feel a certain familiarity or kinship. Through this feeling of familiarity, the role model becomes an exemplar of greatness and a source of inspiration to the admirers (Duyndam 2004, 14-16).

One reason why role models are identified as ‘masters’ in these quests for direction and inspiration is that the *narrative of the ‘master’* is in itself a master narrative, as the term is employed in critical theory. The concept of “master narrative” (also “grand narrative” or “metanarrative”) was brought to prominence by Jean-François Lyotard in his classic work of 1979, with his claim that the postmodern was characterised precisely by a mistrust of unquestioned master narratives (such as Progress or Enlightenment emancipation) which had formed an essential part of modernity (cf. Lyotard 1984 in which the author summarizes a range of views that were developing at the time, as a critique of the institutional and ideological forms of knowledge). Lyotard stresses that until we acknowledge there is a master narrative at work which we all have been structuring and applying, this directive narrative acts invisibly and is perpetuated even by those who are oppressed by it. Only when we recognize this, Lyotard argues, can we call the narrative into question, examine it and make an attempt to change it.

A master narrative is characterised by its legitimation of various minor narratives that grow out of it and depend upon it. In turn, these minor narratives support and embellish the master narrative, which, as a consequence of this interconnectedness, is perceived as obvious, inalterable and fundamental. Theorists such as Gérard Genette (1980), Roland Barthes (1994) and Paul Ricoeur (1986) have shown that narratives are sketches of a shared reality which have established themselves by repetition. They constitute the identities of individuals and

entities (and not least of grand abstract and virtual concepts, e.g. mankind or a nation) in analogy to ‘real life’ stories by highlighting paradigmatic ‘model events’ as ethical or aesthetic exempla. The narrative of the master’s superiority and authority found worldwide in many variants – in texts and images as well as lived in all kinds of social structures – does this by speaking of a person who has been transformed into an ethically or aesthetically great or exalted figure. Along with the master’s superiority, the narrative stresses the master’s distinctness from the person or group of people seeking a relation with him or her as they aspire to greatness “from below”. This binary relationship of great and small, clearly exemplified in the well-known iconography of the devotee sitting submissively at the ‘lotus feet’ of the guru, surfaces in many different forms, both historically and in the present-day. Constantly retold, passionately lived and celebrated in cult, it forms the core of the narrative of the master and is the common denominator for many different forms and expressions of that narrative.

This relational binary is motivated by the human desire for a form of social relationship that is “complementary” (in the sense the word is used by psychotherapist and communications theorist Paul Watzlawick) and at the same time religiously charged. The relationship is complementary, like the paradigm of father and son, insofar as two partners display different behaviours that complement each other: one asks, the other answers; one teaches, the other learns; one commands, the other obeys. This gradient implies a *superordination* and *subordination*. One partner has the *upper* hand (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 69f.). The ‘religious charge’ emerges when the inequality of the partners sets up a vertical tension, within which one individual sees the other as a god or superhuman entity or figure (a hero or star, for example). In *You Must Change Your Life* (2012; orig. German *Du musst dein Leben ändern* 2009), Peter Sloterdijk has given a detailed account of this tension as well as of the desire that regularly accompanies it. According to Sloterdijk, the vertical longing arises

when the child, before learning to walk, experiences a physical “world above” in looking upwards to see the parents. By the onset of puberty, the child begins to re-enact this hierarchical vertical relationship with others, especially with teacher figures, e.g. trainers, gurus, Buddhist masters, craft masters, professors, schoolteachers and authors (Sloterdijk 2012: esp. 179–181). Sloterdijk argues that the aim of the relationship being sought is always self-exaltation, whether by becoming like the divine or achieving a vertical differentiation without God, i.e. a way up into uniqueness, lifted up from the collective as one unmistakably recognisable figure – and not by virtue of lineage or grace, but by personal achievement. The counterpart to this view is horizontality, in which things are taken at face value, and the person seeks as comfortable a life as possible. At the root of Sloterdijk’s theories lies the view that all that is human is self-created and that anthropotechnicity works, both in practical living and in technological and genetic procedures of self-optimisation. A person, constantly recreating him- or herself in practice, achieves transcendence. Sloterdijk’s Rilkean title should also be understood in this sense, namely as an appeal to break with habits of mind and to will the “impossible”.

Whatever we may think of Sloterdijk’s view in detail or in its exhortation to self-improvement, the abundance of quasi-mythical and legendary accounts of those who have (purportedly) attained ‘master’ status is without question a product of the pursuit of self-exaltation and the hierarchical vertical that he describes. In many narratives and accounts of masters, which demonstrate how unique, exemplary and gifted in teaching and leading they are, specific historical contexts, cultural markers and objective differences in teachings all vanish, outshone by a spectacular need to assert exceptional status, authority and pride of place, a need that expresses itself as legend and myth. The socio-cultural contingency of the masters’ actual work is not questioned. Rather, their “mythical aura” is emphasised – that aura which, as Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner puts it in his anthology significantly entitled *Verachtet*

mir die Meister nicht! (from Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Act III, Scene 5; Hans Sachs: “*Verachtet mir die Meister nicht, / Und ehrt mir ihre Kunst!*” [“Do not despise the Masters, / But honour well their art!”], V. 2900f.), “shines as a corona around all masterhood” (1986: 11). The actual individuals and the complex mechanisms of their influence are generally left out of focus in these presentations. To quote Kaltenbrunner once more, “there is something of the aura of the wondrous, mysterious and virtuosic about all masterhood.” That is, according to Kaltenbrunner, there is something that becomes a “mystery” (*Mysterium*) and kindles simultaneous “delight and terror” (*Entzücken und Schauer*) whenever it rises to a certain “height” (10f.). Huston Smith, in reference to the field of religion, expresses the association of masterhood with height and greatness as follows: “the vocation as such [...] is the highest calling life affords. Religious masters have contributed immeasurably to civilizations, if indeed they did not launch every civilization we know about” (Smith 2005; 169).

2 Lessons of the Masters and the “wonders of transmission”

One recent example of a perspective of fascination with the “ascent to masterly heights” is the *Lessons of the Masters* (2003) by the comparatist George Steiner. This book shows a perspective of the “master” based on the premise that greatness and authority are worth striving for, or at least warrant the greatest respect. Exploring the issue of what makes a “great teacher” and “true mastery”, the *Lessons* closely examine the work (in particular the teaching) of outstanding master figures and their relationships with the individuals and groups subject to them. In the process, Steiner tells his own version of the narrative of the master: the exceptional individual and his/her importance to civilisation and its many arts and cultural techniques. A wealth of examples from cultural and intellectual history (mostly, but not only European) are cited to demonstrate that the master and his “lessons” form the basis for all

significant cultural achievements in science, art, literature, religion and philosophy. Steiner's "masters" include Socrates and Plato, Christ and his disciples, Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant, the composition teacher Nadia Boulanger and her students and the American football coach Knute Rockne and those he trained as players and coaches. In brief digressions, Steiner also touches on examples from Jewish culture, especially Hasidism, and considers traditions from India and East Asia, e.g. the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama and Dogen Zenji (whom many regard as the first Japanese patriarch of Soto-Zen).

Steiner's survey of outstanding teaching is an attempt to assemble a variety of historically important teachers (and their students) from as wide a spectrum as possible and present them as parts of a single picture. He makes an enthusiastic case for charisma and the so-called "pedagogical Eros" (118). The *Lessons* characterise the "true Masters" as charismatic, erotic personalities and sages and emphasise the plenitude of their vision and sense of mission. Steiner speaks of how the masters impart truths that are beneficial to life and of the "witchcraft of their presence" (25) of their spirits, of their magic and the aura of the supernatural that surrounds them; making the teachings of the master, in which Steiner sees an indispensable constant of the human condition, something akin to a revelation. Real teaching, he suggests, is an imitation of a divine act of disclosure. It is his position that since antiquity and still in the secularised modern age, the fundamental pedagogical model is the mode of exposition in religious texts: the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran (cf. 7–19, 27–34, 151–156). He sees the act of teaching – his "oxygen and raison d'être" (19) – in this sense "at the pinnacles of privilege, in the high palaces of the arts, of science, of thought" (16–17). The doctoral seminars he held on Thursday mornings for a quarter of a century at Geneva came close to a "Pentecost" (19).

Steiner is particularly fascinated by Eros in leadership and teaching relationships; and

cites well-known examples from the history of religion, philosophy, art and literature to show Eros's power. These examples include the love of the young Alcibiades for Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*; the disciple whom Jesus loved, as it is stressed in the *Gospel of John*; the mutual attraction of Abelard and Heloïse, elevated to sublimity in their correspondence; the close friendship between the draughtsman Cavalieri and Michelangelo, who dedicated sonnets to his pupil; and the relationship between Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, documented in their letters (cf. e.g. 25–38, 62, 76–91). Steiner bitterly laments the banishment of Eros from university teaching, although he does acknowledge the potential for sexual exploitation in such a dynamic.

Steiner's book may be a valuable treasure trove for all those interested in his theme, but the book's uncritical tone is problematic and, from a systematic perspective, rather unrewarding. His arrangement of personalities, characters, bodies of knowledge and teaching traditions from religious, philosophical and literary history into constellations is certainly exceptionally erudite, but Steiner does not press to make further distinctions. Driven by his own passion for the "wonders of transmission" and the "mystery of the thing" (1), he eschews dividing up scholarly, university, aesthetic, philosophical and religious teaching in favour of weaving them into a web in which the individual threads are impossible to disentangle. The approach is a dehistoricising one – and one that aestheticises even the queasiest aspects of pedagogical authority, as the Arendt-Heidegger case shows. To do this, Steiner chooses the sweeping form of the essay. He uses it to circle the concept of the master as a bearer and communicator of life-enhancing "truth" or "a being inspired by vision and vocation of no ordinary sort" (14), so that the reader is whisked along serpentine paths from Empedocles and Pausanias by way of Dante and Virgil to the likes of Faust and Wagner and Max Brod and Kafka. Historical and literary sources are used without differentiation as references for these labyrinthine excursions. The texts used are examined neither for the relationship between

fictionality and historicity (or factuality), nor for their referentiality, i.e. the relationship between fiction and extra-fictional reality, nor is the functionality of fiction within the factuality of history questioned. Furthermore, Steiner does not examine intertextuality and intermediality in any critical and analytical way. Such an analysis might have revealed the origins of the narrative of the master, the images and developments of myth and legend that are associated with it and the ways in which this narrative has developed.

In brief, *Lessons of the Masters* sheds no light on the concept of “master”-hood or the ideas, concepts and role expectations associated with it. The book does not contribute to defusing the more dubious aspects of the concept. Rather it advocates the adoration, veneration and glorification of individuals who are elevated to extraordinary status, and thus, ultimately, it advocates for personality cults. By bringing the master as a father-figure closely into line with the divine, Steiner perpetuates well-established paradigms. In many religions the master enjoys a status superior to that of the biological father, thus he is not infrequently actually called “father”, and even comes to replace the biological parents, certainly in terms of loyalties and affections (Jaffee 2005, 2361). As is the case with God’s designation as Father, this use of words draws from family imagery, connoting loyalty, love and authority. Given the dominantly male *dramatis personae* in many master-student relations, which only underwent some degree of gender liberalisation at a very late historical stage in the twentieth century, we might well see instruction by the master as a genuinely patrilineal model of education for self-exaltation that may have developed in competition with the biologically affirmed relationship between mother and child. It is possible that this other model of social and emotional bond compensates for a specifically male lack: the feeling of inadequacy against the mother’s primary importance to the child based on her ability to feed and nurture it. One might argue that, in order to fill the void created by this deficiency, the male master provides practical, technical, intellectual and spiritual ‘food’. The insistence on the unique gifts of the relationship

between master and disciple may be read as an attempt to install male supremacy in place of such a male lack. It is little wonder, then, that the women's movement has been critical of the master-student relationship. Objections are raised in particular to what is seen as the encouragement of female submission to male supremacy and the risk of sexual exploitation within such power dynamics (cf. Puttick 1999: 143–162, esp. 146f.; referring to the Rajneesh movement, Puttick 1995; on female involvement in the relationship cf. also Puttick & Clarke 1993, a collection of essays on women in religion that comprises a multi-faceted examination of women's roles as disciple, student, and medium on the one hand, and as teacher, leader, and priestess on the other hand).

3 Masters in guilds, secret societies and esoteric contexts

The adulatory attitude towards “master-hood” that Steiner exemplifies has deep roots in the history of the noun “master”. In English it was formerly employed to denote men of high social rank or learning, especially those who held the academic title of Masters of Art or “free masters” of a trade guild. Manual labourers and hired servants in particular used it in addressing their employer, but it was also in general use wherever status differentials were apparent (cf. e.g. Onions 1966: 560).

This usage can be explained by the comparative nature of the word bequeathed by Latin (late Old English *mægester* “one having control or authority”, from the Latin *magister* (noun) “chief, head, director, teacher”, the source of the Old French *maistre*, French *maître*). The noun *magister* comes from the adjective *magnus* (“great”, “extensive”, “lofty”) via the adverb *magis* (“more”, “in a higher degree”, “more completely”) and already had an extremely wide spectrum of meaning in Medieval Latin (Du Cange 1954, vol. V, s.v. *magister*, col. 168a–173b). The semantics of greatness, superiority and authority exhibited in texts, images and performances are actually inherent in the noun, and with these semantics the relation of

superordination and subordination that lies at the heart of the grand narrative of the ‘master’ and is the common denominator of so many stories and scenarios that grow out of it and depend upon it.

Still today, a particular authority is associated with the term ‘master’ in crafts, guilds and trades and in knightly orders. In the Middle Ages, the title was firmly rooted in the skilled trades, which abounded at the time. It was in this period that the process of elevation from apprentice to fellow or journeyman to master developed. Associations formed among craft masters to safeguard their common interests also led to the formation of guilds, i.e. corporations of craftsmen, which still exist in some places, e.g. in Switzerland, sustained by narratives stressing the masters’ superiority. Anyone who had become a fellow and hoped to be a master had further conditions to fulfil, depending on the particular city and guild. For instance, he might have to serve for a certain length of time as a fellow in a particular place, and some guilds required a number of years to be spent working as a wandering journeyman. Applicants also had to pay various fees to the guild, the funeral fund and the master, for whom they would have to make a ‘master-piece’ at their own expense. Finally, elevation to master status was celebrated with a banquet for all masters of the guild (Ogilvie 2011). This progress from apprentice via journeyman to master remains traditional today in commercial, technical and artistic professions, although some details have changed. Anyone holding the title of master in such professions has in that very term proof of comprehensive theoretical and practical knowledge and expertise that enables him to conduct his own business and train successors.

Also medieval in origin is the office of *Hochmeister* (Latin *Magister generalis*), which dates to 1190 and the foundation of the Teutonic Order (*Deutschritterorden*) at Acre in the Levant. Meaning literally “high master”, the title *Hochmeister* corresponds to the “Grand Master” of other chivalric orders and was introduced in 1199, when the Order of Knights

Hospitaller was raised to a spiritual chivalrous order under the authority of a master. “Grand Master” is the title of the highest officeholder in some chivalrous orders, who presides over the community as master of the order. It is found in military, religious and civil orders (such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Orange Order). Since the eighteenth century, after craft guild terminology had been adopted by secret associations and for systems of initiation, the expression “Grand Master” has also been used to denote the presidents of lodges like those of the Freemasons and Rosicrucians. Besides, the lodges of Freemasonry, for instance continue to this day to operate with three degrees: Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason. The semantic fields of ‘master/masterhood’ and ‘brother/brotherhood’ are of great theoretical and practical importance here, as well as in many other secret societies.

This particular employment of the ‘master’ terminology laid the foundations for its emergence and popularisation in esoteric contexts through the twentieth century and down to the present: from the sphere of the secret societies it entered the vocabulary of the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 by Helena P. Blavatsky, as a term for advanced “adepts”, “sages” of particularly high levels of spiritual development who are endowed with occult powers. Not surprisingly, Blavatsky who claimed to be taught by such masters, did not pass up the opportunity to stress their elusiveness: The sages were otherwise inaccessible not only because they lived in remote areas of Tibet but also because they could not literally be seen. It was of particular importance for the further development, dissemination and maintenance of the narrative of the master that Blavatsky’s appropriation of the terminology involved the blending of its specifically European meanings with notions and ideas from South and East Asia (on Blavatsky and the Theosophical use of the “master” terminology as a specific development within the context of the European history of esoteric traditions, see e.g. Godwin 1994, 277–306; Hanegraaff 1996, 448–455; Hammer 2001, 379–386; von Stuckrad 2005, 122–132; Goodrick-Clarke 2008, 211–228; Goodrick-Clarke 2010, 113–160). Like her

kindred spirits and followers, such as Annie Besant (1907) and Charles W. Leadbeater (1925), she blended elements of spiritualism, Mesmerism, Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry with ideas and concepts from Hinduism and Buddhism, propagating the myth of the existence of “Masters of Wisdom”, also known in theosophical writings as “elder brethren”, “Great White Lodge”, “Brotherhood of Shamballa” or “Mahatmas” (e.g. Blavatsky 1893).

This had become possible as an ever larger number of Hindu and Buddhist texts were translated and made available in the course of the emergence of greater interest in foreign cultures and languages through the nineteenth century. The idea that there was once a common basis for all religions was also gaining momentum and provided fertile soil in which the theory of a universal “original religion”, so prominent in German Romanticism, could thrive. Well into the twentieth century, the syncretic notion of an Ur-religion continued to spark a wealth of other connected hypotheses, e.g. the doctrine of the “original revelation” and the theory of “original monotheism”, along with the teachings of the *sensus numinis* (Rudolf Otto), the “hierophanies” (Mircea Eliade) and religious archetypes (C.G. Jung). Riding this current, Blavatsky published works such as *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), attempts at constructing a universal primal human wisdom: the original fount of all known religions and philosophies that had been handed down since time immemorial in particular lines of tradition by masters.

Because of the considerable influence of the Theosophical Society on the esoteric movements of the day and thereafter, myths of masters in possession of secret knowledge gained widespread circulation and contributed to the popularisation of the narrative of the master. Many stories of religious leaders and founder-figures from Asian cultures who passed on their teachings as transmission and/or initiation entered the Western world through translations, retellings and reformulations. At the same time, spiritualist notions of the possibility of communication with so-called ascended masters, the souls of the recently

deceased and other spirit beings were gaining ever more adherents (cf. von Stuckrad 2005; 128f.; Goodrick-Clarke 2010, 154–156). Blavatsky’s claim to have been initiated by masters in the East and to have attained “higher” knowledge there was also, and particularly, much imitated. One striking example is Baird T. Spalding’s *Life and Teaching of the Masters of the Far East*. This “report”, published in several volumes between 1924 and 1955, compiles all the initiations in cosmic and universal knowledge that its author claims to have undergone in the course of his journeys in the Far East. Although Spalding’s authenticity has repeatedly been called into question, his books have been translated into many languages and even since his death have continued to be reprinted on a regular basis (also released as CD audio books). They have thus contributed to the concept of masters “who are assisting and guiding the destinies of mankind” (Spalding 1942–1996: backcover of six-volume edition) becoming a common idea in the field of Post-War alternative religion, within which Spalding’s account developed into a favourite source of inspiration in the second half of the twentieth century.

The emergence of “autobiographical reports” like Spalding’s and the spread of both the wish to be in contact with masters and the assertion of having been in contact with them must have been stimulated by the wish for self-exaltation in the sense described by Sloterdijk. Many of the perspectives and ways of life that are now an integral part of alternative culture were first tested within the New Age movement (e.g. Corrywright 2003; Kemp & Lewis 2007). Within its context, the 1960s and again the 1980s saw upsurges in the appearances of masters or gurus (Finger 1987; Hummel 1996; Forsthoefel & Humes 2005) like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Satya Sai Baba and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Humes 2005, 55–79; Palmer 2005, 97–122; Urban 169–192). As faith in the integrity of Western authorities – parents, legislators, religious officials, worldly leaders, etc. – had been so repeatedly shaken, there was a predilection for placing one’s faith in religious leader figures from South, Central and East Asia. The reference culture of preference was India, where the relationship with the guru and

his female equivalent, the gurvi, has a long tradition (Steinmann 1986; Copeman & Ikegame 2012). From the 1960s on, such masters and gurus vended their doctrines in increasing numbers, mostly coming from Asia and often via North America. They mostly attracted a young following. Some of them became the focal point of New Religious Movements. Meanwhile, an esoteric field was forming within the New Age movement in which self-styled Western masters, including witches, druids and shamans, channelling mediums, tantra and satsang teachers, conveyed messages from transcendent entities, gave life counselling and offered teachings and exercises for the attainment of enlightenment.

By the early twenty-first century, this esoteric field has expanded markedly. Much of its content has diffused out into general society in a popularised form via a plethora of media, with no general awareness of its esoteric quality (Knoblauch 2008). Esoteric worldviews are now widespread, while a cornucopia of services like channelling, astrology, Tarot, Reiki, yoga and qigong have become part of an everyday culture that is influenced by a market-related esotericism predicated on consumption (Lau 2000).

4 Weber's dis-enchantment and Wach's re-enchantment

Engagement with the “master” concept in religious studies began in the context of the quasi-religious veneration of individuals that developed in the German-speaking world around the turn of the twentieth century within *Männerbund* groups and coteries (von See 1990; Brunotte 2004, esp. 89–117; Bruns 2008). Many of these groups made it their aim to re-invigorate or redesign religion, culture and civilisation. Communal enthusiasm for the revitalisation of ancient or “Oriental” philosophical and religious wisdom was expressed in poetic and religious (or parareligious) metaphors to varying degrees. Besides youth groups, which rejected the urban life conditioned by industrialisation in favour of a turn towards the experience of nature, intellectual groups and circles were particularly popular – notably the

Munich Cosmic Circle, which attracted many writers and artists as well as philosophers and scholars (Faber 1994; Norton 2002: 292–310).

Sociologists of the day became aware of this phenomenon of forming into circles and groups. In 1924, Max Scheler (who himself at the beginning of the century had joined the Phenomenological Circle in Munich), published his *Versuche zu einer Soziologie des Wissens*, which took the concept of the “sociology of knowledge” as its subject. In addition to Scheler’s introductory article on “Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge” (1924: 3–146), which was two years later expanded in “Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft” (transl. into English: Scheler 1980), the compilation contains essays (by various colleagues of his) about groups, circles and leagues from antiquity to the modern period that were organised around some form of knowledge transfer. The “master” concept occurs frequently, e.g. in discussions of ancient Greek philosophy or the cult of Dionysus, of various traditions (and churches) of Christianity, of Manichaeism and Hasidism, Buddhism and Taoism. The contributions also include essays on contemporary communities of a quasi-religious type, e.g. the circles of Stefan George, Johannes Müller, Graf Keyserling and Rudolf Steiner. The consensus of the authors is that the relationship to the master always implies his leadership and the propagation of knowledge taking place within structures that are organised and collectivised in authoritarian, hierarchical ways. In the anthology, either the master himself is positioned within a religious context or qualities of a religious nature are identified in him. What the groups discussed in the individual articles have in common is that communicative action within them all has a function of propagating knowledge so as to convey meaning and lend structure (Renger 2012, 4–7).

Max Weber demonstrated interest in voluntary associations of this kind as early as 1910, in a speech at the first German Sociology Congress in Frankfurt (1972: 20-23). He proposed that it was an important task of sociologists to scrutinise “those structures which are

conventionally dubbed *social*”; that is “all that which lies in the gap between the politically organized or recognized powers--state, municipality and established church on the one hand--and the natural community of the family on the other.” This he called “a sociology of associations in the widest sense of the word, from the bowling club--to put it drastically--to the political party and to the religious, or artistic or literary sect” (1972: 20).

Weber himself paid particular attention to the circle surrounding the German poet Stefan George, a group of men who subscribed to their leader’s homoerotic and idiosyncratic vision of life and were considered by George to be the embodiment of the “real” but “secret” Germany (Norton 2002). The George Circle, whose reach extended far beyond the sphere of literature, was exactly the type of voluntary associations that especially titillated Weber’s scholarly curiosity in sociological respects. This kind of group included “sects borne along by artistic *Weltgefühlen*” (Weber 192: 22), admission to which, once having decided to join, required a person to be in possession of certain qualifications and for those qualifications to be subjected to close scrutiny by the association or its leader. Weber was fascinated by associations of this sort as well as by the forces of influence to be observed within them. And under the stimulus of George’s persona he began to examine the concept of “charisma”, which would become a key theoretical concern in the last decade of his career.

Weber’s sociological interest in the subject certainly did not mean that he approved of “the sect of Stefan George” (1972: 22). Although he praised George’s poetry on many occasions (cf. e.g. Weber 1994: 559–563), and met George several times for personal conversations that affected him deeply, he was highly critical of the Circle (Brodersen 1970). And he left no doubt that he rejected as sectarian self-deception the poet’s prophetic mission and his “disciples’” belief in it as well as the deification of the late youth Maximilian Kronberger (Karlauf 2007; 410–418; Kippenberg 2010, 14f.). In view of Weber’s prescription of “dis-enchantment” for Western culture, this is hardly surprising. Weber regarded all the

forms of religion then in vogue with the educated middle classes, from natural mysticism to social Romanticism to the belief in the redemptive power of love, as regressive and contemptible; George was no exception, with his claim to special validity and the whiff of cult that surrounded him. Weber regarded these phenomena as betrayals of the triumph of Western rationality, as he did the entire “mystical Renaissance” in turn-of-the-century Europe and its programme of revision to the way of life.

The aforementioned Joachim Wach, conversely, represents a decidedly different position, even if one closely aligned to Weber. Wach queried the “prevailing rational, even rationalist tendency” (Wach 1925: 51 fn.11) in Weber’s work, and complained that Weber “neglects, or rather refuses [...] to examine from within the religious phenomena that came into his field of view” (Wach 1931: 75). While Weber’s primary concern was to unearth connections between religious impact and overall social development, Wach’s was to develop a typological system of religious sociology by focusing on religious experience and religious praxis. This distinction was reflected as the two scholars respectively investigated associations and their formations. For instance, whereas Weber primarily saw the interrelation of lay members’ social interests with the claims and interpretations of the central religious actors at work in the emergence of religious associations, Wach understood the religious experiences to be the stimulus for the genesis of an association, and sought to show that these experiences took on concrete form with the help of teachings and actions.

It was also from this perspective that Wach wrote *Master and Disciple* as a paean of praise to the “the one who [is destined to] discover and proclaim the holy truth” (Wach 1962: 8), “the leader, the father, the rescuer” (18) – the master. Like Weber’s ideas on charismatic authority, Wach’s account of the master is essentially aligned towards his contemporary Stefan George and his Circle, although he does not make this reference explicit, but allows it to surface here and there. The significant textual surface of the study deals with historical figures,

especially Jesus of Nazareth and Buddha Śākyamuni. Wach develops these as prototypes of the religious master, showing them in relation to their disciples. Like the Greek philosophers Empedocles and Socrates, they figure as carriers of “metaphysical meaning” (8) and serve the argument that the master is “unique” (4f.) and indispensable in the struggle for “knowledge of the essence of things and the destiny of the world” (7), whereas the teacher is “replaceable” (1f.) and vanishingly subordinate to the knowledge that determines his relationship with the student.

The great importance Wach attached to the “master” concept as he saw it can be seen in the significant difference he points out in his study between it and Weber’s type of the so-called “exemplary prophet” – in spite of the parallels, e.g. that both are fulfilling a “mission”. The prophet, he argues, can be exchanged for another prophet without difficulty but the master is irreplaceable (2). In Wach’s account, this irreplaceability and uniqueness extends both to the person of the master and to the genesis of the association. Wach sees the “master” as the authority type of the charismatic leader, whose relationships are determined by his inscrutable structure of personality and an unmistakable claim to rule, and moreover rest upon a concept of the selectness of the leading and the led alike, in a “mutual significance”: “The master becomes a master only in relationship to a disciple” (2). Neither partner in the relationship is conceivable without the other, particularly because of the high degree of commitment. Passionate participation and self-sacrifice in a relationship with a master are, Wach argues, familiar from many religions, e.g. “in the ancient mysteries, in Sufistic union, and in the Hindu, especially Shivaistic, *guru*-practice: the *πατήρ* (father), the sheikh, the *guru*, the zaddik: as a guide of souls, as a door to salvation, they demand the complete devotedness of the disciple, of the ‘son’” (18). The disciple yields himself up to the master by “sacrifice of the body, of the spirit, of all his possessions”, just as the master sacrifices himself to his task, conscious of his personal mission, and assumes the solitude that befits him in his masterly

supremacy, for all the devotion of his disciples (3, 7, 9–11, 14–15, 18).

5 Concluding Remarks

Wach's account of the master, through which he gives his specific version of the narrative of the master, is in many ways a document of its time. In content and diction, it is clearly inspired not only by George himself, but also by Hölderlin, Nietzsche and the German Youth Movement, and in some ways it is more closely aligned to the ideas and ideals of mastery and the *Männerbund* than to the historically and culturally distant models of teaching and leadership in the sources Wach uses. Taking Empedocles as an example, Wach unmistakably bases his ideas on Hölderlin's poetic description of the relationship between Empedocles and Pausanias. When Wach examines Socrates' way of life as a master, Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's discussions of the ancient philosopher shine through. Nietzsche and the self-image of the Nietzschean artist that was so current around 1900 also form the basis for the depiction of the solitude of the uncomprehended master, whose "melancholic wisdom" consists in the silent acknowledgment "that the sweetest and best fruit which ripens for him never can be given away, because who-ever comes to himself indeed comes only to himself" (Wach 1962: 3, 18). These references and a style that attests to Wach's conviction that religious experience can only be expressed in an aesthetic form (Flasche 1978, 79) subject the figure of the master to an idealising mythification.

To conclude, it appears that Wach has used the "master" concept in the sense of an emic category, seeing it through the eyes of an insider and believing in the mission and the selectness of the "experience of the ultimate religious and metaphysical mysteries" (Wach 1962: 8), and is himself party to the disciple's awe at the appearance of the master. Certainly Wach took for granted a kind of metaphysical trajectory of meaning and power, a vertical (to return to Sloterdijk's term discussed above) harbouring the possibility of ascent to

“metaphysical meaning”; and he celebrated the master as the incarnation of the promise of this possibility as revealed to the disciples. “The student sits at the feet of the teacher, who speaks to him from his lofty height. The master would raise his disciple up to himself; he would raise him higher, even above himself: they never meet on the same plane” (4f).

This view of the essential dichotomy of master/disciple versus teacher/student undermines the validity of Wach’s argument as a potential classification in metalinguistic scholarly discourse. What would be necessary to break the master narrative told by Wach would be not only a far more distanced approach to the subject matter, but also a much broader definition of the “master” concept. The rich history of the calque’s usage since the Middle Ages and its frequent application to times and cultures that predate its emergence as a term points to an extensive field of future research that promises rich scholarly rewards.

References

Barthes, R. (1994) ‘The Semiological Adventure’ in *The Semiotic Challenge*. Translated by Richard Howard. Berkeley: UCP.

Besant, A. (1907) *H.P. Blavatsky and the Masters of the Wisdom*. London: Theosophical Publishing Society.

Blavatsky, H.P. (1893) ‘The Theosophical Mahatmas’ in *The Key to Theosophy*, 185–192. London: Theosophical Publishing Society.

Brodersen, A. (1970) 'Stefan George und sein Kreis: Eine Deutung aus der Sicht Max Webers' *Castrum Peregrini* 91: 5–24.

Brunotte, U. (2004) *Zwischen Eros und Krieg. Männerbund in der Moderne*. Berlin: Wagenbach.

Bruns, C. (2008) *Politik des Eros. Der Männerbund in Wissenschaft, Politik und Jugendkultur (1880–1934)*. Cologne: Böhlau.

Copeman, J. and A. Ikegame, eds. (2012) *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge.

Corrywright, D. (2003) *Theoretical and Empirical Investigations into New Age Spiritualities*, Oxford: P. Lang.

Du Cange, C. (1954) *Glossarium Mediae et infimae Latinitatis*. Reprinted from the 1883–1887 edition. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt.

Duyndam, J. (2004) 'Hermeneutics of Imitation: A Philosophical Approach to Sainthood and Exemplariness' in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism*, edited by Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua J. Schwartz, 7–21. Leiden: Brill.

Faber, R. (1994) *Männerrunde mit Gräfin: die 'Kosmiker' Derleth, George, Klages, Schuler, Wolfskehl und Franziska zu Reventlow*. Frankfurt: P. Lang.

Finger, J. (1987) *Gurus, Ashrams und der Westen*. Frankfurt: P. Lang.

Flasche, R. (1978) *Die Religionswissenschaft Joachim Wachs*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Forsthoefel, T.A. and C.A. Humes, eds. (2005). *Gurus in America*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Genette, G. (1980) *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Godwin, J. (1994) *The Theosophical Enlightenment*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Goldammer, K. (1960) *Die Formenwelt des Religiösen. Grundriss der systematischen Religionswissenschaft*. Stuttgart: Kröner.

Goodrick-Clarke, N. (2008) *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*. Oxford: OUP.

Goodrick-Clarke, N. (2010) 'The Coming of the Masters: The Evolutionary Reformulation of Spiritual Intermediaries in Modern Theosophy' in *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*, edited by Andreas B. Kilcher, 113–160. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

- Hammer, O. (2001) *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. Boston, MA: Brill.
- Hanegraaff, W.J. (1996) *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill.
- Humes, C.A. (2005) 'Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: Beyond the TM Technique' in *Gurus in America*, edited by T.A. Forsthoefel and C.A. Humes, 55–79. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hummel, R. (1996) *Gurus, Meister, Scharlatane: Zwischen Faszination und Gefahr*. Freiburg: Herder.
- Jaffee, M.S. (2005) 'Discipleship' in vol. 4 of *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, 2360–2364. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA.
- Kaltenbrunner, G.K. (1986) *Verachtet mir die Meister nicht!: Vorbilder – Vermittler – Virtuosen*. Freiburg: Herder.
- Karlauf, T. (2007) *Stefan George: Die Entdeckung des Charisma*. Munich: Pantheon.
- Kemp, D. and J.R. Lewis (2007) *Handbook of New Age*. Leiden: Brill.
- Kippenberg, H.G. (2010) 'Joachim Wach between the George Circle and Weber's Typology of Religious Communities' in *Hermeneutics, Politics and the History of Religions, The*

- Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*, edited by C. Wedemeyer and W. Doniger, 3–20. Oxford: OUP.
- Knoblauch, H. (2008) 'Spirituality and Popular Religion in Europe' *Social Compass* 55 (2): 140–153.
- Lau, K. (2000) *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Leadbeater, C.W. (1925) *The Masters and the Path*. Madras: Theosophical Publishing House.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- Mensching, G. (1947) *Soziologie der Religion*. Bonn: Röhrscheid.
- Müller, J., ed. (1988) *Guru – Rabbi – Heilige. Religiöse Führer, Lehrer und Meister*. Freiburg: Theologischer Verlag.
- Norton, R. (2002) *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle*. Ithaca: Cornell.
- Ogilvie, S. (2011) *Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds, 1000–1800*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Onions, C.T., ed. (1966) *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: OUP.

Palmer, N.W. (2005) 'Baba's World: A Global Guru and His Movement' in *Gurus in America*, edited by T.A. Forsthoefel and C.A. Humes, 97–122. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Puttick, E. (1995) 'Sexuality, Gender and the Abuse of Power in the Master-Disciple Relationship: The Case of the Rajneesh Movement' *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 10 (1): 29–40.

Puttick, E. (1999) 'Women in New Religious Movements' in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, edited by B.R. Wilson and J. Cresswell, 143–162. London: Routledge.

Puttick, E. and P.B. Clarke, eds. (1993) *Women as Teachers and Disciples in Traditional and New Religion*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.

Renger, A.-B. (2012) 'The Emergence of the Master around 1900: Religious Borrowings and Social Theory' *Journal of Religion in Europe* 5: 1–22.

Ricoeur, P. (1986) *Time and Narrative*. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Vol. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rigopoulos, A., ed. (2007) *Guru: The Spiritual Master in Eastern and Western Traditions. Authority and Charisma*. New Delhi: D.K. Print World.

Sartory, G. and T. Sartory, eds. (1981) *Die Meister des Weges in den großen Weltreligionen*. Freiburg: Herder.

Scheler, M., ed. (1924) *Versuche zu einer Soziologie des Wissens*. Munich: Duncker & Humblot.

Scheler, M. (1980) *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.

von See, K. (1990) 'Politische Männerbund-Ideologie von der Wilhelminischen Zeit bis zum Nationalsozialismus' in vol. 1 of *Männerbände, Männerbünde: Zur Rolle des Mannes im Kulturvergleich*, edited by G. Völger, K. von Welck and R. König, 93–102. Cologne: Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum.

Sloterdijk, P. (2012) *You Must Change Your Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Smith, H. (2005) 'The Master-Disciple Relationship' in *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2005*, edited by P. Zaleski and B. Lopez, 168–183. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. [Reprinted from *Sophia*. 10.1 (2004)].

Spalding, B. T. (1942–1996) *Life and Teaching of the Masters of the Far East*. 6 vols. Marina Del Rey, CA: DeVorss & Co.

Steiner, G. (2003) *Lessons of the Masters*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP.

Steinmann, R.M. (1986) *Guru-Sisya-Sambandha. Das Meister-Schüler-Verhältnis im traditionellen und modernen Hinduismus*. Stuttgart: Steiner.

Urban, H.B. (2005) 'Osho, from Sex Guru to Guru of the Rich: the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism' in *Gurus in America*, edited by T.A. Forsthoefel and C.A. Humes, 169–192. Albany: State University of New York Press.

von Stuckrad, K. (2005) *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. London: Equinox.

Wach, J. (1925) *Meister und Jünger. Zwei religionssoziologische Betrachtungen*. Leipzig: Pfeiffer.

Wach, J. (1931) 'Max Weber als Religionssoziologe' in *Einführung in die Religionssoziologie*, appendix 65–98. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Wach, J. (1962) 'Master and Disciple. Two Religio-Sociological Studies' *The Journal of Religion* 42 (1): 1–21.

Watzlawick, P., J.H. Beavin and D.D. Jackson (1967) *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes*. London: Faber & Faber.

Weber, M. (1972) 'Max Weber's Proposal for the Sociological Study of Voluntary Associations', translated by E.C. Hughes. *Non-Profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 1 (20):

20–23 [first in: *Verhandlungen des Ersten Deutschen Soziologentages vom 19. bis 22. Oktober 1910 in Frankfurt am Main. Reden und Vorträge von Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber u.a.*, Tübingen: Mohr 1911, 39–62].

Weber, M. (1994) *Briefe 1909–1910*, edited by M.R. Lepsius and W. Mommsen, in collaboration with B. Rudhard and M. Schön. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.