



Hermes in the Academy

Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism
at the University of Amsterdam

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF AND JOYCE PIJNENBURG (EDS.)

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Hermes in the Academy

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Ten Years' Study of
Western Esotericism
at the University of Amsterdam**

*Wouter J. Hanegraaff
and Joyce Pijnenburg, eds.*

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PREFACE

JOSÉ VAN DIJCK

Creative innovation in the humanities is usually not a top-down but a bottom-up phenomenon. It happens when individual scholars begin to ask questions that have not been asked before, and come up with new approaches that challenge the academic status quo. But, in order to be successful, not only do such new perspectives have to be recognized as fruitful by the wider academic community, they also need to become embedded in institutional contexts, which allow them to actively participate in scholarly debate and educate new generations of students. The chair group for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (GHF) is a perfect example of such a successful combination of scholarly innovation and academic institutionalization. As documented in this anniversary volume, over the last ten years it has established itself as the leading center of a new field of international research, referred to as the study of Western esotericism.

By the end of the 1990s, that term still caused some eyebrows to be raised. It was not yet so clear to everybody that, far from being a synonym for New Age, the label “Western esotericism” covered a wide range of important and influential currents in intellectual history from the Renaissance to the present, with roots in Late Antiquity; and there were still some suspicions, here and there, that scholars of esotericism might in fact turn out to be closet esotericists... But as the high quality of research in this domain became evident, such doubts quickly began to vanish. GHF has been consistent in setting standards of excellence through the many publications of its staff members, with the two-volume *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Brill, 2005) as a highlight that deserves to be mentioned here in particular. As documented in this anniversary volume, the study of Western esotericism has succeeded in becoming a normal presence on the international academic scene, with professional research organizations, peer-reviewed journals and monograph series, many conferences and, of course, teaching programs. The field is generating great enthusiasm and commitment not only among established scholars, but also among students and burgeoning academics, many of whom have received their education in this field at GHF and are now pursuing Ph.D. projects both in Amsterdam and at other universities worldwide.

In short, the first ten years of the chair for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents have been a success story. The chair is at the very center of an exciting new development in international academic research, and for me, as dean of the Faculty of Humanities, this is a source of great pride and satisfac-

tion. On behalf of the Board of the Faculty and of the University of Amsterdam, I wish to thank the former and present staff members of GHF for their efforts, and congratulate them on all that has been achieved. Of course, none of it would have happened without the more-than-generous donation by Mrs. Rosalie Basten, and the professionalism of the Foundation that was put in charge of it: their collaboration with the Board of the Faculty has always been excellent, and our appreciation extends to them as well. Given the intellectual ambitions that are obvious from this anniversary volume, I am sure that the first ten years of GHF have been only the first beginning of a development that will continue to flourish and expand in the decades to come.

Part 1

History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents: Origins and Development

The Birth of a Chair

ROELOF VAN DEN BROEK

Prior to 1999, it was impossible to study Hermetic philosophy at a Dutch university. The Hermetic combination of mysticism and philosophy smelled too much of pre-Enlightenment times and, still worse, of modern New Age ideas to be attractive to academic philosophers – let alone that they would give it a place in their teaching programs. This was Mrs. Rosalie Basten's disappointing experience as she studied philosophy at the University of Amsterdam in the mid-1980s and wanted to specialize in this special branch of mystical philosophy. But sometimes frustration about an existing situation becomes an incentive to change it. In Mrs. Basten it raised the ambition to establish a Chair of History of Hermetic Philosophy at one of the Belgian or Dutch universities.

However, "... between dream and deed, laws stand in the way, and practical objections," as a famous line of Dutch poetry reads – and indeed, this dream was not an easy one to realize. Especially in academic circles, the common antipathy against esotericism and obscurantism made it almost inconceivable that one could study modern Hermetic and esoteric traditions without being an obscurantist oneself. But, in the summer of 1997, Mrs. Basten felt that the time was ripe for a concrete and definitive proposal to a Dutch university. At that time, the terms "Hermetic philosophy" and "Hermetic traditions" were beginning to mean something to the Dutch public and to policymakers, because the threatening dispersion of the famous *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica*, founded by Mr. J.R. Ritman, was attracting much attention in the popular media. However, Mrs. Basten also realized that university boards are willing to accept an externally financed chair only if the proposed teaching and research programs can be shown to meet the academic standards of independence and good quality and fill an obvious gap in the current curriculum. It is at this point that I became involved in this story.

Mrs. Basten knew of my existence through the Dutch translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* that Gilles Quispel and I had published in 1990. She hoped that I would be interested in her plan and might be of some help in its realization. At our first meeting, in Antwerp on July 23, 1997, she explained her intentions and asked me to join her efforts. Of course I accepted the invitation, because her project offered a unique opportunity to advance the study of an important current in Western culture that was widely neglected in academic research and teaching. The meeting in Antwerp had been arranged by Mrs. Basten's legal advisor, Mr. Willem A. Koudijs, who was to play an important role in the negotiations and legal documentation that would follow. Looking back, I can only con-

clude that the three of us formed a perfect team. Rosalie was the inspiration and driving force behind the entire enterprise: she not only had the vision but also very concrete and practical ideas, as well as the financial means to realize them. As a senior partner in a well known Dutch law firm, Willem was well versed in conducting complicated negotiations and drafting legal documents. As for me, as a long-time professor and a former faculty dean, I knew the Dutch university system quite well, while my scholarly record was not so bad that the university authorities would not take me seriously. We decided to take immediate action on two fronts: Mr. Koudijs would come up with a first draft of the Articles of the Foundation that had to be established, and I would contact the University of Amsterdam to find out whether it would be interested in the chair. The preference for Amsterdam was primarily due to the existence of several excellent book collections on hermetism and related subjects in that city.

Already on August 12, 1997, I was received by Mr. K.J. Gevers, the President of the Board of Governors of the University of Amsterdam. He proved to be very interested in the project, especially as he learned – to his considerable astonishment – that we were aiming at the appointment of a full-time professor and possibly two other qualified scholars as his assistants. When I explained that our only intention was purely academic research, without any ulterior motive, he suggested we opt for an ordinary professorship. This would imply that the professor and his staff (in Dutch terminology “de leerstoelgroep,” or “chair group”), although financed by an external institution, would fall under the responsibility and supervision of the university and be subject to all its normal regulations. His idea was that this approach would facilitate the group’s full integration into, and acceptance by, the newly created Faculty of Humanities. Later on, in October 1997, he repeated this suggestion in a discussion with Mr. Koudijs, but at that time we were not yet convinced that this would be the right direction to take. We understood that if we went for an ordinary professorship, complicated arrangements had to be made, which would require protracted negotiations, and that in the end the university would have a greater influence over the chair than we had in mind at the outset. For these reasons, we also seriously considered the simpler model of an extraordinary professorship, but we finally decided to follow Mr. Gevers’ initial advice.

Still in August 1997, Mr. Koudijs presented a first draft of the Articles of the Foundation, which we discussed on the 5th of September. Much was still undecided at that time, but the progress we were making was reflected in the revised versions that were produced during the next months. These efforts finally led to the official establishment of the “Foundation Chair of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents,” on February 20, 1998. Mrs. Basten, Mr. Koudijs and myself formed the first Board of Governors of the Foundation. In this connection, attention has to be drawn to two aspects of the Articles. The first is the explicit stipulation, in Article 2.1, that the main goal of the Foundation is “to further the study of Hermetic philosophy and related currents, *independent of any view of life* (‘onafhankelijk van iedere levensbeschouwing’).” Of course, scholarly independence is a prerequisite in all academic research, but in this case we

thought it wise to mention it explicitly in the Articles of the Foundation. In order to avoid any suspicion that the chair might be a disguised esoteric mission post, we also stipulated that the University of Amsterdam has the right to appoint two members to the Board of the Foundation (art. 4, 3). This was brought into effect on May 27, 1999, with the appointment of Mr. Frans Ch.M. Tilman, a financial expert, and Dr. Sybolt J. Noorda, who, at that time, was president of the Board of Governors of the University of Amsterdam. The second aspect that deserves attention is that the Articles explicitly define the main goal of the chair as “the study of Hermetic philosophy *and related currents*,” which implies that in fact the entire Western esoteric tradition belongs to the research area of the chair.

The negotiations with the University of Amsterdam and the financial regulations that had to be made took the greater part of 1998. As already indicated, we finally opted for an ordinary chair within the University of Amsterdam, which in fact reduced the position of the Foundation to that of an external sponsor. The Foundation was (and still is) able to finance a full-time professor, two assistant professors, two doctoral candidates, and a secretarial position. Although the phenomenon of an externally financed chair was not completely unknown at that time, the university had no experience with the integration of a complete endowed chair group – in fact a small institute – into the academic system. In discussions with the then dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Professor Karel van der Toorn, and its financial director, Mr. Wim K.B. Koning, the main outlines were defined. Many problems had to be solved, but the negotiations progressed in a good atmosphere and finally led to an agreement that was officially signed on November 12, 1998. That this agreement, which still satisfies both parties, could be concluded, was due in particular to the efforts and the ingenuity of Mr. Koudijs and Mr. Koning.

However, the establishment of an academic chair group alone is not a guarantee that it will succeed: that depends on the quality of its research and teaching. We realized that it was absolutely necessary to develop a clear vision of the kind of research and the teaching program that was going to be carried out by the group. For this reason we organized a small brainstorming conference, hosted by Mrs. Basten in Beaulieu, France, January 18-20, 1998. The most prominent scholar invited was Professor Antoine Faivre, who held the chair of “History of esoteric and mystical currents in modern and contemporary Europe” at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (Sorbonne), Paris. At that time, his chair was the only one in the entire world that was comparable to the chair we envisaged, which made his advice very valuable. Other scholars invited to the conference were Jean-Pierre Brach, who was *Chargé de conférences* at the EPHE and a specialist in the esotericism of the early modern period; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, who was conducting postdoctoral research in modern esoteric currents at the University of Utrecht; Cees Leijenhorst, a specialist of early modern philosophy who had published on Renaissance Hermeticism; and myself, a specialist in ancient gnosticism and Hermeticism. The composition of the group was not random, for in this same period, Faivre, Hanegraaff, Brach and Van den Broek were also involved in the early preparations of the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*

(Leiden: Brill, 2005). Through this work we already had a good overview of the history of Western esotericism as a whole, from Antiquity to the present, and of the scholars who were pursuing serious studies in that field. The conference resulted in three recommendations, which have all been adopted. The first one was that research and teaching would focus on the period from the early Renaissance to the present day, of course without ignoring the sources of esotericism in the Hermetic, gnostic and related currents of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. With regard to the teaching program, the conference advised to strive for complete BA and MA courses, because only then could the chair be fully effective. The third recommendation was to negotiate with the university about integrating the chair into the Faculty of Humanities as much as possible, because that would make it much easier to realize a full teaching program.

Immediately after the agreement with the university had been signed, the dean of the Faculty of Humanities installed the usual selection committee, which had to nominate a candidate for the chair. Most of the members of this six-person committee were appointed by the university; the Foundation was represented by myself. Through advertisements in two Dutch newspapers and direct e-mail to scholars and scholarly networks all over the world, interested academics were invited to apply. The committee conducted interviews with three qualified candidates and finally decided to nominate Dr. Wouter J. Hanegraaff. He was officially appointed by the board of the university on July 15, 1999. Over the course of the year 2000, the academic staff of the chair group was completed, with the appointment of two assistant professors: Dr. Jean-Pierre Brach (Renaissance and early modern period) and Dr. Olav Hammer (19th and 20th centuries). A new chair was born and a new field of scholarly research and teaching had become part of the academic system.

Ten years later, we can only conclude that the enterprise has been very successful. Initially, as the agreement between the Foundation and the University of Amsterdam was made public, some skeptical and even suspicious voices were heard, also within the academic establishment. But it did not take long for these voices to be silenced by the high quality of the scholarly output of the chair group. Within a decade, the chair has acquired an excellent national and international reputation. It has become one of the world's most important centers of historical research in the domain of Hermetic and esoteric studies and has proven to be very productive in producing high-standard publications and attracting students from all over the world. The chairholder and the first assistant professors proved to be scholars of great quality: Olav Hammer is now Professor of History of Religion at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, Jean-Pierre Brach is professor of History of esoteric currents in modern and contemporary Europe at the *École Pratiques des Hautes Études* in Paris, as Antoine Faivre's successor, and Wouter Hanegraaff was elected as a member of the prestigious Royal Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2006, which not only was a personal honor but also clear evidence that the study of Western esotericism has become an accepted academic discipline.

In retrospect, one can indeed say that in 1997 the time was ripe, because all

circumstances favorably concurred: in an atmosphere of growing public interest in the phenomena of Hermeticism and Western esotericism, Mrs. Rosalie Basten felt that the time had come to realize her ideal of an academic chair for the study of Hermetic and esoteric traditions; she put together a capable team – if I am allowed to say so – that was able to bring her plans into effect; the University of Amsterdam immediately saw the importance of this initiative and was very helpful in establishing the chair; and there were very competent scholars available who could make, and in fact did make, the chair a success from its very beginning. But nothing would have happened if Mrs. Basten had not taken the initiative. By founding the Chair of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, she has rendered an invaluable service to the development of a young academic discipline, and for this she deserves the gratitude of all the scholars involved.



The scholarly staff of GHF in 2009.

From left to right: Osvald Vasiček, Tessel Bauduin, Marco Pasi, Wouter Hanegraaff, Kocku von Stuckrad, Joyce Pijnenburg, Egil Asprem.

Ten Years of Studying and Teaching Western Esotericism

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

When I first heard that there were plans for creating a chair devoted to the history of Hermetic philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, I could only pinch my arm very hard, to check whether I was dreaming. This was in the autumn of 1997. Twelve years later, having seen how a dream can become reality in the prosaic context of a modern academic institution – and how that reality, in turn, can allow new generations to pursue their dreams – sometimes I still feel a need to check that I am awake.

During my studies at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Utrecht, in the second half of the 1980s, I had come across a book that I now recognize as a pioneering effort in the study of Western esotericism. Written with infectious enthusiasm and impressive erudition, Will-Erich Peuckert's *Pansophie* (1956) evoked an exciting intellectual culture that had flourished during the time of the Renaissance, with major representatives such as Marsilio Ficino, Paracelsus and Jacob Böhme, but that seemed to have been almost forgotten by contemporary scholarship. I started asking my professors about these personalities and their ideas, and quickly began to make the typical experience with which all scholars in our field are familiar. The cultural domain discussed by Peuckert seemed to make my teachers quite uncomfortable, and to my repeated requests for information and suggestions, they responded by tossing the embarrassing topic on to another colleague as if it were a hot potato. Nobody seemed willing to touch it, and it did not take me long to decide that if this were the case, then somebody had to do it. My decision to specialize in the domain of what has sometimes been called “rejected knowledge”¹ was the best one I have made in my life.

Eventually I discovered that although good scholarship in this domain was indeed not so easy to find, it did, of course, exist. Like every novice in the field, I devoured the pioneering books of Frances A. Yates, which had put the study of Renaissance hermeticism on the map in the 1960s,² and, a bit later on, I discovered the work of a French professor at the Sorbonne who was just beginning to get more widely known internationally, and whose many books and articles covered the field from the 15th century to the present under the rubric *L'ésotérisme occidental*, Western esotericism.³ At a memorable conference in Lyon in 1992,⁴ I had the chance to meet this Antoine Faivre in person, along with other major scholars whose work I was busy discovering. Joscelyn Godwin, Massimo Introvigne, Thomas Hakl and many others who would become friends and fellow-travelers in the years to come were all there. This meeting in Lyon, then, was the

beginning of an extremely fruitful academic collaboration that has continued up to the present day in the context of the Amsterdam Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (henceforth GHF, the abbreviation referring to the Dutch title) and, later, the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE).⁵ Faivre and I agreed that something needed to be done to create a podium for the study of Western esotericism, and together with Karen-Claire Voss we succeeded in convincing the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) to let us organize a series of sessions on this topic in the context of its 17th quinquennial conference in Mexico City, 1995.⁶ This initiative was well received, and has been continued at subsequent IAHR conferences (Durban 2000; Tokyo 2005).⁷ With hindsight, it proved to be the first beginning of what has become a rather big wave in the international conference circuit: today it is difficult for any scholar to keep track of all the academic meetings devoted to esotericism and related topics, and impossible to attend even just a few of them.⁸

By the second half of the 1990s, and as networks developed, it was becoming clear that although the number of generalists was still relatively small, there was certainly no lack of good scholars specializing in various aspects of Western esotericism. Often they proved very enthusiastic about meeting and collaborating with colleagues within that larger context, particularly because (as many of them have told me over the years) the price they often had to pay for their research interests was a certain degree of isolation within their own institutions or disciplines. That good scholars in the field of Western esotericism were available in abundance, but just needed to come out of the woodwork, was demonstrated by the circa 150 international specialists who agreed to contribute to an ambitious project initiated by Hans van der Meij of Brill Academic Publishers – whose continuous support for our field has been invaluable – not long before we heard the sensational news about the chair in Amsterdam: the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, which would eventually see the light of day in 2005.

That it fell to me to be appointed at this unique new chair, in my very city of birth, was another occasion for me to pinch myself hard. And I needed to be awake, indeed, for there was work to be done! During the first academic year (1999-2000), I was running an academic team consisting of only myself, assisted from December 1, 1999 on by our first secretary, Drs. Andréa Kroon, who eventually decided to pursue a different kind of career and was succeeded on February 1, 2001, by Dr. Hilda Nobach, who is still with us today. A first priority was, of course, to fill the two assistant-professor vacancies, and, in spite of the unfamiliarity of the field, it proved possible to find two very good scholars. Out of 52 candidates, the selection committee made a unanimous decision in favor of Dr. Jean-Pierre Brach for the history of Western esotericism from the Renaissance through the 18th century, and Dr. Olav Hammer for the period from the 19th century to the present. Brach was able to begin his work on September 1, 2000, and Hammer started a few months later, on January 1, 2001.

While interdisciplinary by the very nature of its field of study, GHF was embedded as a “chair group” (“leerstoelgroep”) in the Department of Theology and

Religious Studies of the Faculty of Humanities, which was merged a few years later with the new Department of Art, Religion and Cultural Sciences. Its course program was, and still is, part of the Religious Studies program. Prior to the introduction of the new Bachelor/Master structure, that program was still rather modest during the first few years. It consisted of a “minor” of three modules: a general introduction to Western esotericism in lecture format (“Hermetica I”) and two seminars on essential sources and selected themes (“Hermetica II” and “Hermetica III”). The program was popular from the beginning: up to the present day, the number of students registering for Hermetica I has never been less than 50.

The first GHF team remained intact for about two years, after which there followed a somewhat complicated period, due to several personnel changes combined with the introduction of the Bachelor/Master system in the academic years 2002-2003. Jean-Pierre Brach was elected as Antoine Faivre’s successor for the Chair of “History of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe” at the 5th section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (Sorbonne) on September 1, 2002; and not very much later, starting on January 1, 2004, Olav Hammer became associate professor and, very soon after, full professor in the Study of Religion at the University of Southern Denmark, Odense. During the same year when, following Brach’s departure, we found ourselves temporarily reduced to only two permanent staff members, the “minor” was reconceptualized in view of the new Bachelor program, and a new Master program had to be introduced. The “minor” now assumed the basic shape it still has: after the general introduction of Hermetica I, Hermetica II was henceforth focused on the early modern period, and Hermetica III on the period of the 19th century to the present. At a later stage, in 2006-2007, it was further expanded with a module focused on Antiquity and the Middle Ages (called Hermetica II: the other two seminar modules now became Hermetica III and IV). The Master program came to consist of three modules with fixed titles, but each with a content (formulated in the subtitle) that alternated on a two-year basis. The rationale for this was to maximize the choices available for students in the 2-year Research Master Study of Religion: for example, a student with a special interest in the early modern period had the option of following Renaissance Esotericism I and II consecutively, while someone else specializing in contemporary esotericism might decide to follow Occult Trajectories I and II, and so on.

Obviously the teaching load was increased considerably by the introduction of the new Bachelor/Master system, and it was important to have a complete team in place as quickly as possible. Out of 20 candidates, Dr. phil. habil. Kocku von Stuckrad was elected as Brach’s successor, and he joined GHF on March 1, 2003. The vacancy of Hammer’s position occurred soon after, and out of 21 candidates, Dr. Marco Pasi was elected, who began working with us on July 1, 2004. This was the beginning of the second GHF team, which has remained intact for a period of five years. Only very recently, Kocku von Stuckrad was elected full professor for the Study of Religion at the University of Groningen. Since his new job begins on September 1, 2009, his departure coincides exactly with the

end of GHF's first 10-year period. With his imminent succession by Peter Forshaw, the beginning of the second decade will also mean the start of a new phase.

With the introduction of the Bachelor/Master system and the completion of the second team, continuity and stability had been achieved for the teaching program at GHF. During the first two years, the number of Master students was still rather small; but as the publicity machine of the Faculty of Humanities professionalized and the existence of our program became quite well known internationally, the number of applications increased rapidly. This made it possible to apply quite stringent admission criteria for international students, resulting in a level of academic quality during the last few years which, we are proud to say, is excellent by any standard. Over these last years, the number of students in all Master seminars has been somewhere between 15 and (exceptionally) 25, with a majority of international students who come to Amsterdam especially for our program. The general degree of focus and commitment among all of them – including of course the Dutch students, who have been able to profit from one or more of the Bachelor courses as well – has been more than satisfactory, and is making the teaching job a challenge and a pleasure. Perhaps most important of all, several students each year succeed in being admitted into a Ph.D. program, sometimes at very prestigious universities such as Yale or Cambridge. This means that a new generation is now being educated with a solid knowledge of Western esotericism, many of whom will eventually land academic positions in various disciplines at universities worldwide. Their presence will make it much easier for the generations after them to pursue studies in this domain. In this manner, we believe that GHF, along with the programs in Paris and Exeter, is laying important foundations for the future expansion of Western esotericism as a field of research.

This brings me to the doctoral program. Next to the three permanent staff members and a secretary, the available budget makes two Ph.D. positions possible on a permanent basis. Finding suitable candidates was not easy during the first years, for the simple reason that there were not yet any students who had graduated from the program. Fortunately, however, there are always a few individuals who discover a field like this on their own. One morning in April 2000, I found myself listening to a young art historian who had just finished her graduate thesis and wanted to study the relation between hermetism and art theory in the Renaissance. Having read her thesis, I realized that she might be just the right person for the job. Marieke van den Doel was indeed selected for the position, and was appointed as our first Ph.D. student on April 1, 2001. Over the following years she successfully met the challenge of mastering a complicated field of philosophical and religious speculation for which her previous studies had hardly prepared her, and, on February 12, 2008, she defended her dissertation *Ficino en het voorstellingsvermogen* (Ficino and the Imagination): an important event for her personally, but also for GHF, which proudly produced its first Doctor. Van den Doel's successor, Osvald Vasiček, has been working on his dissertation on the Christian kabbalist Johannes Reuchlin since June 1, 2006. Having graduated in Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam, with a specialization in

Western esotericism, Vasiček was the first of our Ph.D. students to have come out of our own program.

The second Ph.D. position, for esotericism in the 19th and 20th centuries has had a somewhat more uneven development. Roelie van Kreijl was appointed at GHF from 2003 to 2007, and since January 16, 2008, her successor, Tessel Bauduin, has been working on a dissertation about the relation between surrealism and esotericism. Bauduin's double major in Art History and Cultural Studies included several GHF modules, and one of her two theses was about an art collection grounded in esoteric symbolism. Shortly after Bauduin's appointment, the number of Ph.D. students working under GHF supervision expanded quite suddenly. An international student from Norway, Egil Asprem, finished the Research Master in the Study of Religion with a specialization in Western esotericism, and succeeded (on his first attempt) in earning one of the prestigious "Top Talent" scholarships of the Dutch Organization of Scientific Research (NWO). Having started on September 1, 2008, he is now engaged in a research project about the relation between esotericism and scientific naturalism in the 20th century. Finally, still in 2008, the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* decided to further expand its activities by employing a Ph.D. student as a temporary staff member. The choice fell on Joyce Pijnenburg, another Dutch student who has completed the Master Study of Religion at the University of Amsterdam with a specialization in Western esotericism. Connected to GHF as a "recognized external Ph.D. student" she is working on a dissertation about the role of imagery in Giordano Bruno. With these four talented young scholars all working on their dissertations, the prospects of GHF on the Ph.D. front are looking very healthy.

The basis of any successful academic institution is the excellence of its scholarly output. The research of GHF was registered during the first academic year under the heading of a new program titled "Western Esotericism and Modernization," which became part of the history section of the Research Institute Culture and History (ICH). In 2006, it was succeeded by a new program titled "Western Esotericism: Continuities and Discontinuities." The publication output has been more than satisfactory from the beginning, as can be seen from the lists of publications available in the online annual research reports of GHF (www.amsterdamhermetica.nl) and the printed annual reports of ICH. In the ten years of its existence, there have appeared 10 monographs (five of which also appeared in one or more translations), 11 books (including two multi-volume ones), circa 200 articles (not counting very small dictionary entries) and circa 45 book reviews. Restricting ourselves here only to book-length publications devoted to esotericism specifically, they fall within a range of various categories: critical editions and monographs devoted to central figures (Lodovico Lazzarelli, Guillaume Postel, Emanuel Swedenborg, Aleister Crowley); general treatments of the history of Western esotericism, astrology, modern kabbalah, and modern shamanism; thematic treatments of esoteric strategies of epistemology, polemics, and the role of eroticism and sexuality in Western esotericism; plus a *Festschrift* and a large reference work.⁹

Another important dimension of academic success concerns contributions

made to international scholarly media, research meetings, and organizations. Over the last ten years, members of GHF gave circa 150 lectures at universities and conferences in many countries, and they were active in organizing 11 international conferences or conference sessions themselves. Thus, in the context of the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR), sessions on Western esotericism have been organized in 2000 (Durban) and 2005 (Tokyo); as part of the affiliated European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR), such sessions have been organized since 2006; and in the context of the American Academy of Religion, annual sessions with protected “group” status were first introduced in 2005. Specialized conferences on Western esotericism with specific thematic focuses were organized as part of the organization *Politica Hermetica* in 2005 (Esotericism and the Feminine), at the Esalen Institute in California during four consecutive years between 2004 and 2007 (focusing respectively on Religious Experience, Eros and Sexuality, Literature, and Altered States of Consciousness), and at the University of Amsterdam in 2004 and 2007 (on astrology and modern kabbalah).

If these conferences involved GHF members traveling to conferences worldwide, well-known scholars were coming to Amsterdam as well, to give lectures or seminars. The Canadian specialist of medieval magic Claire Fanger gave a lecture on May 26, 2000; the American historian on the Enlightenment and Freemasonry Margaret Jacob on May 1, 2002; and the English expert of Giordano Bruno Hilary Gatti on June 7, 2002. From November 2-3, 2004, the American specialist on the history of alchemy Lawrence M. Principe gave a lecture and a seminar for Master students; the Israeli scholar of kabbalah Boaz Huss lectured on September 22, 2005; and finally, the American Elliott R. Wolfson, another major kabbalah specialist, gave a lecture and a seminar for master students on March 13-14, 2008. Furthermore, several international Ph.D. candidates or post-doctoral students (for some reason, all of them from Scandinavian countries) have spent periods of time at GHF to profit from the opportunities it offers for collaboration and exchange. Thus Henrik Bogdan from Sweden was in Amsterdam during the first half of 2002; and two Finnish postdoctoral researchers, Titus Hjelm and Kennet Granholm, were there in the academic years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 respectively.

On the editorial front, members of GHF have been active as editors not only of collective volumes (see above), but also of scholarly journals and monograph series: *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (since 2001) and the affiliated “Aries Book Series” (since 2006), both published by Brill;¹⁰ the series “Gnostica: Texts & Interpretations,” originally published by Peeters, later by Equinox;¹¹ the electronic journal *Esoterica*, the annual French series *Politica Hermetica*, and the journal *The Pomegranate*.¹² But their editorial activities are not limited to media devoted specifically to Western esotericism: the active presence of our staff members in broader interdisciplinary contexts, notably the study of religion and of new religious movements, is reflected in their editorship and board membership in major journals like *Numen*, *Religion*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Nova Religio*, *Religion Compass*, and *Journal of Religion in Europe*, and in such

monograph series as “Religion and Society” (Walter de Gruyter) and the “Numen Book Series” (Brill).

It has now been ten years ago that – due to the original vision of Rosalie Basten and the determination and professional expertise of Roelof van den Broek and Willem Koudijs – the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam courageously embarked on a unique academic venture, the viability of which still had to be demonstrated. At that time, the study of Western esotericism was still very much an idea in the heads (and, of course, the writings) of a limited group of devoted scholars, rather than a manifest and established reality in the international academic world. Today this situation has changed irreversibly. There are now three academic chairs (Paris, Amsterdam, Exeter), with successful teaching programs that produce new generations of young scholars each year; with the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) and the American Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) there are now two professional organizations for scholars in the field, who meet at large conferences each year; with *Aries* and the “Aries Book Series” the field has its own specialized academic journal and an affiliated monograph series, next to a wide variety of other journals and series with related or overlapping interests; and that sessions devoted to the study of Western esotericism are routinely present at large conferences such as those organized by the AAR or the IAHR is no longer surprising or controversial.

For me personally, and probably for many colleagues with me, the inaugural conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism in Tübingen, 2007, organized by Andreas Kilcher and Philipp Theisohn, was a kind of crowning event in this context. When I walked on to the podium to give my welcome address as the president of the society, the realization hit me of how far we had come. The large university auditorium was completely full, and in the crowd I saw the faces not only of many of the most important international scholars in our field, but those of an incredible number of young and upcoming academics as well, including a large group of students from Amsterdam who were now busy making friends with their colleagues from Exeter and elsewhere. The enthusiasm that our field is generating among these new generations is, without any doubt, the most gratifying phenomenon of all, because it means that a process has been set in motion that will be taken into the future and is no longer dependent on the small group of dedicated scholars who started it in the 1990s.

Still, the fact that much has been accomplished since that period, and since the beginning of GHF in 1999, should not be a reason for complacency. Old patterns only change slowly, and although scholars of Western esotericism may sometimes feel that the battle for academic acceptance has been won, in fact it is only just beginning: rather, what we need to do during the next decade is move that battle to new fronts. Most attention so far has gone to securing a place for our field in the context of the study of religion, and with considerable success; but one of the most attractive aspects of esotericism is the fact that it refuses to be constrained within the limits of one academic domain only. As demonstrated by the many disciplinary backgrounds of the international students who come to

Amsterdam to follow our program each year, Western esotericism can be studied from perspectives as different as history, philosophy, art history, the history of science, musicology, classics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics and, occasionally, even such technical disciplines as linguistics, architecture or mathematics. There is still a world to be won in each of these domains, and sometimes even the barest foundations still need to be created. In this sense, the first ten years of GHF at the University of Amsterdam have been only the very first beginning of a development that is bound to continue and expand over the next decades. Solid foundations have now been created, but in a field as complex and endlessly fascinating as ours, only the sky should be the limit.

Notes

- 1 Webb, *Occult Underground*, 191; and cf. Frenschkowski, "James Webb und die Epistemologie des Irrationalen."
- 2 Yates, *Giordano Bruno; Rosicrucian Enlightenment; Occult Philosophy*. See also the contribution by Allison Coudert elsewhere in this volume.
- 3 Faivre's major *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* appeared in 1986 (followed by a greatly expanded two-volume edition in 1996); but his short study *L'ésotérisme* of 1992, containing his influential definition of Western esotericism, can be regarded as the definitive starting point of the modern study of Western esotericism (Hanegraaff, "Nascita dell'esoterismo," 125-128). For Faivre's international influence beginning in the same year, see especially Faivre and Needleman, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*; idem, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition*.
- 4 The conference took place at the Bibliothèque municipale of Lyon on April 6-8, 1992. The proceedings were published two years later as Martin and Laplantine, *Défi magique*.
- 5 www.esswe.org.
- 6 The proceedings were published as Faivre and Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*.
- 7 Papers presented at the Tokyo conference became the core of Hammer and von Stuckrad, *Polemical Encounters*.
- 8 For overviews of conferences and papers presented from 2000 to the present, see the journal *Aries*.
- 9 All these titles are in the bibliography.
- 10 *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (Brill Academic Publishers) is the continuation as a "new series" of the earlier journal *ARIES*, which had been published by the French "Association pour la Recherche et l'Information sur l'Esotérisme" since 1985. As a new series, *Aries* has appeared since 2001, under the editorship of Antoine Faivre, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (both from 2001 to the present), Roland Edighoffer (until 2008) and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (since 2008), with Marco Pasi as book review editor since 2005. The affiliated "Aries Book Series: Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism" (chief editor Wouter J. Hanegraaff) exists since 2006. At the time of writing, ten volumes have appeared.

- 11 The series “Gnostica: Texts and Interpretations” (Peeters, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Garry W. Trompf) was published from 1997 to 2003. After four volumes, it was continued with a new publisher, Equinox, under editorship of Kocku von Stuckrad and Garry W. Trompf, with two volumes published at the time of writing.
- 12 Brach and Hanegraaff are on the board of *Esoterica* (www.esoteric.msu.edu; published since 1999 under the general editorship of the American scholar Arthur Versluis); Pasi is on the board of *Politica Hermetica* (published since 1987 under the auspices of an association of the same name); Pasi and von Stuckrad are on the board of *The Pomegranate: The Journal of Pagan Studies* (published since 1997 under the general editorship of the American scholar Chas Clifton).

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	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Hanegraaff											
Brach											
vStuckrad											
Hammer											
Pasi											
Kroon											
Nobach											
vdDoel											
vKreijl											
Vasicek											
Bauduin											
Asprem											
Pijnenburg											

Teaching Program GHF 1999-2009

1999-2000

	Hermetica I: Introduction (Hanegraaff)
	Hermetica III: Themes (Hanegraaff)

2000-2001

Hermetica II: Sources (Hanegraaff)	Hermetica I: Introduction (Hanegraaff)
	Hermetica III: Themes (Brach)

2001-2002

Hermetica II: Sources (Brach)	Hermetica I: Introduction (Hanegraaff)
	Hermetica III: Themes (Hammer)

2002-2003

Hermetica I: Introduction (Hanegraaff)	Hermetica II: Early Modern Western Esotericism and the Visual Arts (van den Doel)
Hermetica III: 19 th -20 th cent. (Hammer)	Occult Trajectories I: Mesmerism-Spiritualism-New Thought (Hammer)
Western Esotericism and the Quest for Enlightenment I: Theosophy, Illuminism and the Age of Reason (Hanegraaff)	
Renaissance Esotericism I: Jewish-Pagan-Christian Syncretism (Hanegraaff)	

2003-2004

<p>Hermetica I: Introduction to Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff)</p> <p>Hermetica III: 19th-20th cent. (Hammer)</p> <p>Western Esotericism and the Quest for Enlightenment II: Spiritual Techniques and Experiential Phenomena (Hanegraaff)</p> <p>Renaissance Esotericism II: Religious Pluralism and Esoteric Discourse (von Stuckrad)</p> <p>Western Esotericism and (Post)Modernity (Hanegraaff)</p>	<p>Hermetica II: Early Modern (von Stuckrad)</p> <p>Occult Trajectories II: Charisma in 19th/20th Century Esotericism (von Stuckrad)</p>
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2004-2005

<p>Hermetica I: Introduction to Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff)</p> <p>Hermetica III: 19th-20th cent. (Pasi)</p> <p>Western Esotericism and the Quest for Enlightenment I: Theosophy, Illuminism and the Age of Reason (Hanegraaff)</p> <p>Renaissance Esotericism I: Jewish-Pagan-Christian Syncretism (von Stuckrad)</p>	<p>Hermetica II: Early Modern (von Stuckrad)</p> <p>Occult Trajectories I: Magic and Modernity (Pasi)</p>
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2005-2006

<p>Hermetica I: Introduction to Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff)</p> <p>Hermetica III: 19th-20th cent. (Pasi)</p> <p>Contested Knowledge II: Paganism, Images, and Christian Identities (Hanegraaff)</p> <p>Renaissance Esotericism II: Religious Pluralism and Esoteric Discourse (von Stuckrad)</p>	<p>Hermetica II: Early Modern (von Stuckrad)</p> <p>Occult Trajectories II: Women and Gender Issues in Modern Western Esotericism (Pasi)</p>
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2006-2007

Hermetica I: Introduction to Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff, von Stuckrad, Pasi)	Hermetica II: Antiquity and Middle Ages (von Stuckrad)
Hermetica III: Early Modern (Hanegraaff)	Hermetica IV: 19 th -20 th cent. (Pasi)
Contested Knowledge I: Altered States of Consciousness and Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff)	Occult Trajectories I: Western Esotericism in the Mirror of Modern Literature (Pasi)
Renaissance Esotericism I: Jewish and Christian Kabbalah (von Stuckrad)	

2007-2008

Hermetica I: Introduction to Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff, von Stuckrad, Pasi)	Hermetica II (von Stuckrad)
Hermetica III (Hanegraaff)	Hermetica IV (Pasi)
Contested Knowledge II: Paganism, Images, and Christian Identities (Hanegraaff)	Occult Trajectories II (Pasi)
Renaissance Esotericism II: Secrets of Nature (von Stuckrad)	

2008-2009

Hermetica I (Hanegraaff, Pasi)	Hermetica II (von Stuckrad, Pijnenburg)
Hermetica III (Hanegraaff)	Hermetica IV (Pasi)
Contested Knowledge I: Altered States of Consciousness and Western Esotericism (Hanegraaff)	Occult Trajectories I: The Esoteric in Modern and Contemporary Art (Pasi, Bauduin)
Renaissance Esotericism I: Jewish and Christian Kabbalah (von Stuckrad)	

Part 2

Glimpses of Research

The Pagan Who Came from the East: George Gemistos Plethon and Platonic Orientalism

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

Tief ist der Brunnen der Vergangenheit.
Sollte man ihn nicht unergründlich nennen?
Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder*

Western esotericism has much to do with the search for origins, as we will see, and scholars have been no less concerned with the origins of esotericism. 1462 has often been mentioned as a starting point, because in that year a Greek manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrived in Florence, and its Latin translation by Marsilio Ficino (1463; first printed in 1471) led to what Frances Yates called “the Hermetic Tradition” of the Renaissance. But in history, every origin has itself an origin: in this case, one that occurred 24 years earlier, with the arrival in Florence of a Byzantine philosopher, George Gemistos, later known as Plethon (ca. 1355/1360-1452).¹

He traveled as part of a delegation under the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paleologus and the Orthodox Patriarch Joseph II, who had been invited to participate in a Council in Italy to discuss a possible reunion of the Eastern and Western churches. On 4 March, 1438, the party met the Pope in Ferrara, but mainly for financial and security reasons the Council was transferred to Florence in January of the following year, where it continued well into the summer. Plethon was already around 80 years old, and several of the Greek delegation’s outstanding intellectuals had once been his pupils. The impression he made among the humanists of Florence has become the stuff of legend:

When there was a wonderful gathering in the West of wise and eminent men, and a great debate on the matter of the Church’s doctrines, how can one describe the admiration they felt for this man’s wisdom and virtue and his powers of argument? He shone among them more brightly than the sun. They regarded him as their common teacher, the common benefactor of mankind, the common pride of nature. They called him Plato and Socrates, for he was not inferior to those two in wisdom, as everybody would agree.²

Much later, in 1492, Marsilio Ficino would evoke a similar picture in the dedication to Lorenzo de’ Medici of his translation of Plotinus’ *Enneads*. At the time of the Council, he writes, the young Cosimo de’ Medici had often listened to Plethon, who had “spoken of the Platonic mysteries like a second Plato.”³ The

implication is that, during those meetings, Plethon had planted the seeds that had blossomed two decades later in what has been called the Platonic Academy of Florence.⁴

Platonic Orientalism

The travel of this “second Plato” from Byzantium to Florence is of great symbolic significance, for, in the person of Plethon, the humanists made their first contact with a living embodiment of what may be referred to as Platonic Orientalism (or, if one prefers, Orientalist Platonism).⁵ The origins of this phenomenon are found in Late Antiquity, when many authors belonging to the milieu of what we now call Middle Platonism transformed the philosophy of Plato into a religious worldview with its own mythologies and ritual practices, focused on the attainment of a salvational gnōsis by which the soul could be liberated from its material entanglement and regain its unity with the divine Mind.⁶ The basic assumption common to these milieus is captured in an oft-quoted passage from the 2nd-century Pythagorean Numenius:

On this point [i.e., the problem of God], after having cited and taken notice of Plato’s testimonies, one should go further back and connect them to the teachings of Pythagoras, calling next upon the peoples of high renown so as to include their initiations, dogmas and cultural foundations, which they accomplish in full accord with Plato, in short, to all on which the Brahmans, the Jews, the Magi and the Egyptians were in agreement.⁷

Far from being an isolated instance, this statement was utterly typical of the period: innumerable sources⁸ refer to the reigning idea that the most ancient “barbarian” peoples possessed a pure and superior science and wisdom, derived not from reason but from direct mystical access to the divine, and that all the important Greek philosophers up to and including Plato had received their “philosophy” from these sources. The modalities of such transmission were not seen as problematic: after all, countless testimonies confirmed that Plato himself and all of his notable predecessors had personally traveled to Egypt, Babylon, Persia and even India, where they had studied with the priests and sages.⁹ In short, not only was Greek philosophy seen as derived from oriental sources, but the Egyptians in particular could claim to be the true founders of philosophy as such.¹⁰ In this context, “philosophy” was well understood to be much more than the pursuit of knowledge by unaided human reason: its true concern was divine wisdom and the salvation of the soul.

Wise Men from the East

As a typical modern heir of the Platonic orientalist perspective, Plethon was firmly convinced that the true wisdom had originated with the Persian sage Zoroaster, the chief of the *magi*. Now the Council of Ferrara and Florence was obvi-

ously not about philosophy but about church doctrine and politics; and that an ancient Persian sage could have something to do with Plato may have been neither apparent nor particularly relevant to the Italian churchmen and politicians. But that a suggestive parallel could be drawn between the visit of the Byzantine delegation to the head of Western Christianity, and the biblical story of the *magi* who had come from the East to venerate the Christ child – thereby confirming the concordance of their ancient wisdom with the teachings of Christianity – was certainly not lost on them. Hence, during the festivities around the feast of St. John at the closing of the Council in 1439, the Greeks were dazzled by a luxurious procession of men dressed up like the *magi* following the star.¹¹ This spectacle was staged presumably in honor of their own presence, but carried a subtext of Western superiority that they were unlikely to miss: for all their wisdom, the Eastern sages had been obliged to travel all the way to the West, not the other way around, and having reached their destination they had knelt and paid homage to God's representative on earth. The parallel with the Byzantines traveling to the Pope in Italy was hard to overlook.

Twenty years later, in 1459, Cosimo de' Medici commissioned a great fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli called *The Procession of the Magi*, in which the memory of the Council still resonates strongly.¹² As convincingly argued by Brigitte Tambrun with reference to this work of art, Cosimo's well-attested fascination with the biblical *magi* from the East is inseparable from his memory of the Council and the revival of Plato that took shape under his patronage in Florence. The key factor in that constellation was Plethon. Referring directly to the time of the Council, Ficino later wrote to Cosimo that Plato's spirit, living in his writings, had left Byzantium to fly like a bird (*advolavit*) to Cosimo in Florence;¹³ and it was taken for granted that the *magi* who venerated the Christ child could have been none other than the disciples of Zoroaster. Hence Tambrun's conclusion:

Plato makes his return because he is the inheritor at the same time of the *magi* (according to Plethon) and of Hermes (according to the Latin Fathers, notably Augustine and Lactantius). ... The fresco of Benozzo Gozzoli presents a genealogy of wisdom: the *magi* – Plato – Christ, doubled by a geographical orientation of temporality: the Orient – Greece – Florence. The procession magnifies the point of culmination while at the same time always recalling and referring to the point of origin: the oriental *magi* are the originators of the wisdom of which the Greeks – Pythagoras, Plato, Plotinus, Plethon – are the inheritors, and this wisdom comes to Florence thanks to the Medici who gather it.¹⁴

George Gemistos in Florence

Who was this "second Plato" who had come from the East, and made such an impression on his audience? One of the most notable philosophers of the late-Byzantine era, George Gemistos was born in Constantinople and raised in a well-educated Christian family. After studying in Constantinople and Adriano-

ple, he established himself as a teacher of philosophy in his city of birth. Probably toward the end of the first decade of the 15th century, Emperor Manuel II Paleologus sent him to Mistra in the southern Peloponnese, a town with a relatively free-spirited atmosphere where the ancient Hellenic traditions still survived, and which would remain his residence for the rest of his life. Far from being an ivory-tower philosopher, Gemistos seems to have been active in a variety of public functions: in Constantinople he was member of the Senate, and during his life he held various administrative positions, acted as a judge, and was frequently consulted by the Emperors and the Despots of the Morea. Even when he was not consulted, he offered his advice anyway. Although the church suspected him of heresy, the imperial family seems to have thought highly of him, and he was richly rewarded for his services. Although he was a layman, his presence in the imperial delegation to the Council of Ferrara and Florence was therefore not surprising.

It might seem strange for a man approaching his 80th birthday, but the Council was undoubtedly the turning point of his life, as indicated not only by his adoption of a new pen name “Plethon” (probably with deliberate reference to his status as a “second Plato”¹⁵), but most significantly by the fact that his major writings were produced during and after his trip to Italy. Although, as an opponent of Union, he made some active contributions to the official proceedings of the Council, their theological hairsplitting left him rather indifferent; but he immediately felt at home among the Florentine humanists, who eagerly sought his advice about Greek philosophy. Plethon must have been flattered by their attention and admiration, but shocked by their lack of knowledge about Plato and Aristotle. The former had only just begun to be rediscovered, with pioneering but as yet limited translation efforts by Uberto Decembrio, Leonardo Bruni and a few others;¹⁶ and the latter was poorly understood not only by the humanists, but even by the scholastics, who claimed his authority but actually knew him mainly through Latin and Arab sources, reading him through the lenses of Averroes – who had not even known Greek. To correct such misunderstandings, during his sojourn in Florence Plethon wrote a short text in Greek, *Wherein Aristotle disagrees with Plato*, usually referred to as *De differentiis*. It purported to demonstrate that Aristotle went wrong whenever he departed from Plato and is considered the opening shot in the famous Plato-Aristotle controversy of the Renaissance, which lasted until the early 1470s.¹⁷

The Religion of Fire and Light

Much more important in reference to our concerns is Plethon’s version of the *Chaldaean Oracles* and his commentaries on them. This collection – famously referred to by Franz Cumont as the “Bible” of the late antique theurgists – is among the most important textual references of “orientalist” Middle Platonism and had enjoyed an exalted status in the late neoplatonist curriculum.¹⁸ Plethon knew it from the 11th-century collection preserved by Michael Psellus, but eliminated six oracles from it and presented the result together with his commentary

and a brief “explanation” under a new title: *Magical Sayings of the Magi, Disciples of Zoroaster*.¹⁹ From “Chaldaean” the oracles had therefore become “magical”; and for the first time in history²⁰ they were attributed to Zoroaster, the chief of the *magi*.

Whence this attribution, and what is its significance? Most specialists today explain it in terms of a specific chain of transmission from pagan antiquity to Islamic culture, from where it could have reached Plethon, who was raised as a Christian, by means of a Jewish intermediary: a combination which derives much of its fascination from the suggestion that Platonic Orientalism could function as a privileged medium enabling “discursive transfer” across the boundaries of all the three great scriptural traditions.²¹ Crucial to this story of transmission²² is the shadowy figure of a certain Elissaeus, a Jewish teacher mentioned in two letters by George Scholarios. Scholarios had been Plethon’s student and therefore knew him well, but eventually turned against his teacher and attacked him as a heretic and a pagan inspired by demons:

The climax of his apostasy came later under the influence of a certain Jew with whom he studied, attracted by his skill as an interpreter of Aristotle. This Jew was an adherent of Averroes and other Persian and Arabic interpreters of Aristotle’s works, which the Jews had translated into their own language, but he paid little regard to Moses or the beliefs and observances which the Jews received from him.

This man also expounded to Gemistos the doctrines of Zoroaster and others. He was ostensibly a Jew but in fact a Hellenist. Gemistos stayed with him for a long time, not only as his pupil but also in his service, living at his expense, for he was one of the most influential men at the court of these barbarians. His name was Elissaeus.²³

In another letter, Scholarios repeated most of these elements, referring to Elissaeus as a “polytheist” and adding that he met his end in the flames. He writes specifically that Plethon had “no previous knowledge” of Zoroaster before being introduced to the Persian sage by his Jewish master.²⁴

Plethon himself never mentions Elissaeus, and his enemy Scholarios remains our only direct source, but the latter’s statements make sense if they are placed in context. The “court of the barbarians” (that is to say, the Muslims) in this period could only be Andrianople, which had been captured by the Turks in 1360, and where many Jews enjoyed high functions in the Ottoman magistrature and administration. That Elissaeus was an adherent of “Averroes and other Persian and Arabic interpreters of Aristotle’s works” identifies him as a philosopher typical of this time and place, who combined the occidental Aristotelianism in the tradition of Averroes (imported and translated by Spanish Jews) with its oriental and Avicennian counterpart in the influential “illuminationist” philosophy of Suhrawardī and his *ishrāqī* school.²⁵ That the latter was wholly grounded in Greek philosophy, and, more specifically, Platonic Orientalism, has been demonstrated exhaustively by John Walbridge.²⁶ At the very opening of Suhrawardī’s

Philosophy of Illumination we indeed find a passage that might almost be called a Platonic orientalist *credo*:

In all that I have said about the science of lights and that which is and is not based upon it, I have been assisted by those who have traveled the path of God. This science is the very intuition of the inspired and illumined Plato, the guide and master of philosophy, and of those who came before him from the time of Hermes, “the father of philosophers,” up to Plato’s time, including such mighty pillars of philosophy as Empedocles, Pythagoras, and others. The words of the Ancients are symbolic and not open to refutation. The criticisms made of the literal sense of their words fail to address their real intentions, for a symbol cannot be refuted.²⁷

In an analogous passage, Suhrawardī emphasized the limits of peripatetic reason when it comes to understanding the “science of lights,” whose nature and reality can ultimately be known only by the direct intuition of “pure souls” during a state of divine ecstasy:

All those possessing insight and detachment bear witness to this. Most of the allusions of the prophets and the great philosophers point to this. Plato, Socrates before him, and those before Socrates – like Hermes, Agathodæmon, and Empedocles – all held this view. ... Whoso questions the truth of this ... let him engage in mystical disciplines and service to those visionaries, that perchance he will, as one dazzled by the thunderbolt, see the light blazing in the Kingdom of Power and will witness the heavenly essences and lights that Hermes and Plato beheld. He will see the spiritual luminaries, the wellsprings of kingly splendor and wisdom that Zoroaster told of ... [A]ll the sages of Persia were agreed thereon. ... These are the lights to which Empedocles and others alluded.²⁸

If Elissæus was indeed a Platonic orientalist and an adherent of Suhrawardī’s “science of lights” – and all our information seems to support that assumption – this provides us with a background for better understanding how Plethon could have arrived at his ideas about the *Chaldaean Oracles* as the most ancient source of the universal wisdom tradition. With their pervasive symbolism of light and fire as representing the divine, they would be considered highly representative not only of Suhrawardī’s ancient pre-Platonic “science of lights” but also, more specifically, of the fire cult that had always been associated with Zoroastrian religion. In the Introduction to his *Philosophy of Illumination*, Suhrawardī distinguished explicitly between the true doctrine of light that was taught by the ancient Persian philosophers, the false doctrine of the “infidel Magi,” and the heresy of Mani.²⁹ Furthermore, anybody looking at the Greek sources from that perspective – and everything Plethon writes about Zoroaster can ultimately be traced to them³⁰ – could not fail to notice that the term *magos* had a double meaning there as well: it could mean a “sage” practicing the ancient cult of the

true gods or it could have the negative meaning of a sorcerer, a practitioner of *goēteia*.³¹ Plethon, for his part, now seems to have concluded that, whereas Zoroaster and the *magi* were the depositors of the ancient, true and universal religion of Zoroaster, the “Chaldaeans” represented a later development that had corrupted the truth, leading to the false doctrine of dualism and practices of sorcery. Hence, all three oracles that dealt with *goēteia* were removed by him from Psellus’ collection³² along with the adjective “Chaldaean,” and the remaining series was attributed to Zoroaster and the *magi*. In this manner, Plethon believed he had restored the most ancient source of the Platonic tradition to its original purity.

The Hidden Pagan

Back in Mistra, Plethon wrote his major philosophical synthesis, the *Nomoi* (Laws), which seems to have been made accessible only to the select membership of his intimate circle of pupils. When Plethon’s manuscript turned up in the possession of Princess Theodora in c. 1460-1465, his enemy Scholarios (now Patriarch of Constantinople) had most of it burned and ordered the destruction of any surviving copies on pain of excommunication. Scholarios himself, however, preserved those parts he felt he needed to back up his accusations against his former teacher. In the surviving opening chapters of the work, the Platonic orientalist perspective is developed in some detail, beginning with an introduction of the major ancient “lawgivers and sages” who came after Zoroaster: Eumolpus (founder of the Eleusinian mysteries), Minos (the Cretan lawgiver), Lycurgus (the Spartan lawgiver), Iphitus (the reviver of the Olympic Games) and Numa (who had instituted religious laws among the Romans). Plethon continues by stating that the Indian Brahmins and the *magi* are to be preferred among the barbarians, and the *kourētes* among the Greeks; and he finishes with a further list of authorities, including the priests at the oracle of Dodona, “inspired men” like Polyides, Tiresias, Chiron and the Seven Sages, and finally Pythagoras, Plato and other philosophers belonging to their school, notably “Parmenides, Timaeus, Plutarch, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus.”³³

At least three things must be noted about this list. First, Plethon is explicit in opposing his list of “lawgivers and philosophers” as a positive category against its negative counterpart, consisting of “poets and sophists.” This latter term turns out to be a code for the founders of revealed religions, and Christians in particular.³⁴ Second, as the very title of the work also suggests, the combination of “philosophers and lawgivers” has evident political implications: by preaching a return to the “ancient wisdom” away from the “sophists,” Plethon was advocating a reform not only of religion but of the state and its laws as well.³⁵ And third, on his list of ancient authorities there are some surprising absentees. Orpheus is not mentioned among the early Greek sages,³⁶ nor is Proclus among the Neoplatonists;³⁷ but most striking is the absence of Hermes and Moses. In trying to explain this omission, we come to the heart of the matter: the relation between paganism and Christianity in Plethon’s version of the ancient wisdom discourse.

Plethon's genealogy is a deliberate alternative to the Christian apologetic literature since Justin Martyr, according to which the Greeks were dependent upon Moses.³⁸ Brigitte Tambrun has plausibly argued that the first chapters of his *Nomoi* are modeled after the Prologue of Justin's *Dialogue with Tryphon*, arguing that in writing them, Plethon took inspiration from the satirical writings of Lucian of Samosata, with which we know him to have been familiar.³⁹ With the experience of the Council fresh in his mind, the supremacy of Greek tradition had to be reaffirmed; but the origins of true philosophy were traced back not to Moses but to a rival legislator, Zoroaster. The polemical intention cannot possibly be overlooked: in clear contradiction to the entire tradition of patristic apologetics, Plethon was trying to replace the religion grounded in Mosaic Law by a different one grounded in Zoroaster's ancient philosophy of fire and light.⁴⁰ In doing so, he was essentially adopting Celsus' strategy of excluding Moses from the genealogy of wisdom.⁴¹ That he also ignored Hermes is slightly more puzzling but may be explained by a combination of factors: a traditional Greek disrespect for the ancient Egyptians,⁴² the fact that Hermes was also known as a legislator and might therefore weaken the claim Plethon was making for Zoroaster,⁴³ and, most importantly, the fact that Hermes could always be presented as having learned his wisdom from the Egyptian Moses, which would weaken the strength of Plethon's argument by re-introducing the patristic alternative via the back door.⁴⁴

Plethon, defending a universal and perennial tradition of ancient wisdom grounded in the religion of Zoroaster and the *magi*, was so deliberately breaking with the patristic apologetic tradition that the conclusion cannot be avoided: what he had in mind was nothing less than a revival of Hellenistic paganism in deliberate opposition to Christianity. A typical manifestation of Platonic Orientalism, it was to replace the exclusive monotheism linked to the name of Moses by an inclusive or qualitative monotheism along the lines of Celsus and Proclus.⁴⁵ If we give credence to the testimony of George of Trebizond, Plethon believed that his philosophy was destined to replace Christianity and Islam as the religion of the future. In George's words:

I myself heard him at Florence ... asserting that in a few more years the whole world would accept one and the same religion with one mind, one intelligence, one teaching. And when I asked him "Christ's or Muhammad's?" he said, "Neither; but it will not differ much from paganism." I was so shocked by these words that I hated him ever after and feared him like a poisonous viper, and I could no longer bear to see or hear him. I heard, too, from a number of Greeks who escaped here from the Peloponnese that he openly said before he died ... that not many years after his death Mohammed and Christ would collapse and the true truth would shine through every region of the globe.⁴⁶

There is almost universal agreement among specialists about the fact that Plethon was indeed a "neo-pagan" opponent of Christianity (although he obvi-

ously had to conceal this, since preaching his views openly would have been a capital offense in Byzantium).⁴⁷ It is important to emphasize how unique and exceptional this was. The historiographical cliché of a “Pagan Renaissance” is certainly misleading in its suggestion that the Platonic and Hermetic revival of the later 15th century involved a conscious rejection of Christianity on the part of its major representatives.⁴⁸ On the contrary, the Renaissance Platonism that would emerge from Marsilio Ficino’s translations was, and would always remain, a deeply Christian phenomenon. If Plethon was certainly the crucial pioneer of Platonic orientalism in the 15th century, he seems to have remained virtually alone in his radical departure from Christianity.⁴⁹

Fiction and History

Nevertheless, one might say that with Plethon, the pagan cat was out of the box. His case shows that once the basic textual sources of the Platonic tradition became available to a Christian culture where the need for religious reform was widely felt, paganism became a religious option, at least in theory. The importance of Plethon does not lie primarily in his immediate influence, which has remained quite limited,⁵⁰ or even in the impact of his writings during the later 15th century. His true significance lies in the domain of cultural mnemonics,⁵¹ that is to say, in his symbolic status as the “second Plato” from the East whose memory was eminently suited for being romanticized or demonized depending on one’s perspective. The idealizing perspective is evident, for example, in the passage quoted above from Charitonimos Hermonymos and in the famous image, conjured up by Ficino, of the young Cosimo de’ Medici conceiving the idea of a “Platonic Academy” while sitting at Plethon’s feet. As recently as 1986, in the opening passages of his monograph, Woodhouse referred to this as the “legend” of Plethon, which still dominated the philosopher’s memory among historians of the late-Byzantine Empire and the early-Renaissance.⁵² Among many examples of the romanticized Plethon in modern scholarship, a perfect example is that of Will-Erich Peuckert in his *Pansophie* of 1936:

... [the Italian humanists] had heard of Plato as of a land that is magical. The name had fascinated the spirits of the young new age, and created the highest expectations. And now, here is somebody who knows him, who knows everything, and whose age – he is almost ninety years old – glows upon him like ripening wine [*dessen Alter ... an ihm erglüht wie greisender Wein*]. After having sown his seed, he returned back to Misithra. But what remained was his idea ...⁵³

Scholars have been far from immune to the attraction of this image, and have only reluctantly given it up in favor of less romantic although more accurate descriptions. But the negative image of Plethon contributed to his notoriety as well. We already saw that in the (frankly paranoid) imagination of George of Trebizond, who believed in a full-blown conspiracy of Platonists seeking the

destruction of Christianity, Plethon was a “poisonous viper” hiding behind the mask of a venerable philosopher.⁵⁴ In a very similar vein, Scholarios described Plethon as a man who had been “dominated by Hellenic ideas” since his youth and was reading the Greek poets and philosophers not for the sake of their language but “in order to associate himself with them.” As a result, he had come under the influence of demons and had fallen into the same errors as Julian the Apostate. This development had culminated in his apprenticeship with the lapsed Jew Elissaeus. Ever since, he had been trying to conceal his true ideas for opportunistic reasons, but was unable to do so while teaching his pupils.⁵⁵

Besides the idealized picture of the wise philosopher and herald of ancient truth, then, we have its counterpart: the sinister picture of the pagan subversive, a kind of secret agent of demonic forces hiding behind a mask of benevolence. Applied to a wide range of personalities, the history of Western esotericism is replete with endless variations on both images, and they contribute in no small measure to how the field is often perceived in the popular imagination: from the positive notion of “inner traditions” and venerable teachers of ageless spiritual wisdom that might heal the alienation of the modern world, to its negative counterpart of “occult forces of darkness” and its sinister representatives, who try to draw their victims towards the abyss of insanity and immorality. The academic imagination is not immune to either of these two, but tends towards a third perspective inherited from the Enlightenment, which perceives the field and its representatives as neither good nor evil, but simply questions their seriousness. From such a point of view, a figure like Gemistos Plethon would appear as neither wise nor demonic, but merely deluded or confused: a bearded old man with strange ideas, engaged in futile attempts to restore ancient superstitions.

None of these pictures is historically accurate, but each of them catches the imagination and can be effectively transmitted through the popular media. To a considerable extent, the study of Western esotericism is an exercise in deconstruction and disenchantment, because it frequently proves necessary to replace attractive myths by more precise but perhaps more prosaic analyses. Scholarly research in these areas therefore comes with a certain price, but it carries benefits as well: by deconstructing the simplifications on which our cultural certainties are built (see, for example, the “disjunctive strategies” mentioned by von Stuckrad in his contribution to this volume), we discover how much we had forgotten, and it becomes possible to discover new patterns of connections and uncover levels of historical complexity to which earlier generations were largely oblivious.

The Origin beyond Origins

We have seen that some 24 years after Plethon’s trip from Byzantium to Florence, a Greek manuscript containing 14 Hermetic tractates made a similar journey. These two East-West transmissions stand at the historical origin of the Renaissance revival of Platonic Orientalism, from which emerged a complex

series of historical currents, which are now studied under the rubric of Western esotericism. Today we know that the Platonic orientalist milieu was a product of Late Antiquity, which may thus be seen as the historical origin of our field. But, according to the texts themselves and those who read and commented upon them, the real origin of origins went back much further, indeed. The ancient wisdom had been born “in the east,” that is to say, in a mysterious realm of occidental otherness; and this had happened at a time when time itself, perhaps, had barely begun. The true origin of origins could only be without an origin, for as formulated much later by Johannes Reuchlin, “The ancient approaches the primordial, the primordial borders on the eternal, and the eternal is close to God, who rules over eternity.”⁵⁶ For the true believer in “ancient wisdom,” then, it derived (as suggested by Thomas Mann in his great novel about monotheism and the Egyptian orient) from a mysterious and inexhaustible source beyond history and time.

Notes

- 1 The most important general studies of Plethon are Masai, *Pléthon*; Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*; Tambrun, *Pléthon*. Moreover, important chapters are devoted to him by Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. I, 193-217 and his appendix “Pletho’s Influence” in vol. II, 436-440; and Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, vol. I, 35-82. For a short and up-to-date overview, see Tambrun, “Plethon, Georgios Gemistos.”
- 2 Hermonymos, “Kyrio Georgio to Gemisto,” 807D; transl. according to Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 12.
- 3 Ficino, *Opera*, 1537; English transl. in Hankins, “Cosimo de’ Medici,” 150-151 (with Latin in Appendix II, o.c., 160-161).
- 4 On the largely fictional nature of the Platonic Academy of Florence, see Hankins, “Cosimo de’ Medici”; idem, “Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence”; idem, “Invention of the Platonic Academy.”
- 5 The term was coined in 2001 by John Walbridge, *Wisdom of the Mystic East* (see subtitle).
- 6 For typologies and general characterizations of these Middle Platonic milieus, see Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 396; Nock, “Préface,” vii; and Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*, 4-5. For a detailed analysis based on Majercik’s typology, see Dylan Burns’ Masters thesis completed at GHF (Amsterdam 2004), “Ἀρρητος λόγος τέλειος, 64-112; and for Platonic Orientalism in connection with Plethon, see Burns, “*Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster*.” On the hierarchical relation between philosophy and gnōsis in this context, see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 97-104; and Hanegraaff, “Altered States of Knowledge.”
- 7 Numenius, *Περὶ ταγαθου*, bk. I, fragm. 1 a (Des Places ed., 42).
- 8 Festugière, *Révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste I*, 20, and see the many testimonies discussed in the rest of the chapter.
- 9 The many late antique references are conveniently listed in Hopfner, *Orient und griechische Philosophie*, 1-9; and cf. Dörrie, “Platons Reisen zu fernen Völkern.”

- 10 Hopfner, *Orient und griechische Philosophie*, 8.
- 11 On this procession and its significance, see Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 26.
- 12 Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 23-33.
- 13 Ficino, "Proemium", in Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum II*, 104-105.
- 14 Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 31; and see the analogous argument made by Allen, *Synoptic Art*, 37-40. Tambrun's reference to Augustine as an authority for the revival of Hermes is questionable, but this does not affect her argument.
- 15 Masai, *Pléthon*, 384-386; Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 186-188. His pupil Michael Apostoles also addressed him as a "second Plato," and Cardinal Bessarion not only referred to him as "second only to Plato" (Woodhouse, l.c.), but at one point even as his reincarnation: "... Plato's soul ... has been sent to earth to assume the body of Gemistos and his life" (letter of condolences to Plethon's son, as reproduced in Masai, *Pléthon*, 307).
- 16 See Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1, parts I-II.
- 17 Modern edition in: Lagarde, "Le *De differentiis* de Pléthon"; English translation in Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 192-214. For overviews of the Plato-Aristotle debate against the background of Plethon's text, see Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1, 193-217; Monfasani, *George of Trebizond*, 201-229. See also o.c., 202: Plethon claimed that he wrote *De differentiis* "without serious intent" during an illness that kept him indoors, "to comfort myself and to please those who are dedicated to Plato."
- 18 On the Chaldaean Oracles generally, see Majercik, *Chaldaean Oracles*, 1-46; Des Places, *Oracles Chaldaïques*, 7-57; Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy*; Safrey, "Neoplatoniciens"; Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra I*, 44-57.
- 19 The standard critical edition is Tambrun-Krasker, *Μαγικά λόγια*. Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 48-61, gives an English translation of Plethon's version of the Oracles and his "Brief Explanation," and summarizes the Commentary.
- 20 Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, I, 61 with note 162 (correcting Bidez and Cumont, *Mages hellénisés I*, 160-161 with respect to a document printed in vol. II, 251).
- 21 For the term "discursive transfer," see von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism," 84-85. For the notion of transconfessional Jewish, Christian and Muslim milieus during this period and context, see Wasserstrom, "Jewish-Muslim Relations," 71-74; Panaino, "De Zoroastre à Georges Gémiste Pléthon."
- 22 The importance of Elissaeus was first highlighted by Masai in 1956 (*Pléthon*, 55-60) and adopted by Dannenfeldt ("Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles," 12). The connection with the Islamic mysticism of Suhrawardī (see further discussion in text) was suggested by Shlomo Pines in an oral response to a paper by Masai at a conference on Neoplatonism in 1969 (Masai, "Pléthon," 442-444, and discussion Pines-Masai on 445). The resulting notion of a Suhrawardī-Elissaeus-Plethon transmission was adopted by Corbin in 1971 (*En Islam Iranien*, II, 34-35) and explored at greater length by Tardieu in 1986 ("Pléthon lecteur des oracles," 141-148). It has been accepted by the leading contemporary specialist Tambrun (Tambrun-Krasker, *Μαγικά*

- λόγια, 41-44; “Marsile Ficini et le ‘Commentaire’ de Pléthon,” 21-22; *Pléthon*, 36-37, 92-94). Some doubts about this line of transmission are expressed by Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, I, 37-41.
- 23 Letter to Princess Theodora Asesina, the wife of the Despot of Mistra, Demetrios Palaiologos. Scholarios, *Oeuvres*, IV, 152-153; transl. according to Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 24.
- 24 Letter to the Exarch Joseph, but here writing as if he is addressing Plethon in the second person. Scholarios, *Oeuvres*, IV, 162; transl. according to Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 25.
- 25 Tardieu, “Pléthon lecteur des oracles,” 144-146.
- 26 Walbridge, *Leaven of the Ancients*; idem, *Wisdom of the Mystic East*.
- 27 Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, Introduction (Arab orig. with English transl. in Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2).
- 28 Ibid., II.2.165-166 (in: Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 107-108).
- 29 Ibid., Introduction (in: Suhrawardī, *Philosophy of Illumination*, 2).
- 30 Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 26, 63.
- 31 Tambrun-Krasker, *Μαγικὰ λόγια*, 43-44; Tambrun, “Marsile Ficini et le ‘Commentaire’,” 21-22. See also the extensive discussion of the term *magos* in De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 387-394.
- 32 It concerns Psellus’ oracles 6, 8 and 39 (resp. 150, 206 and 149 in Des Places’ standard edition). See discussion in Tambrun-Krasker, *Μαγικὰ λόγια*, 155-156, who also discusses possible reasons for the removal of three more oracles.
- 33 Plethon, *Nomoi* I.2 (Brague ed., 31-33); and see discussion in Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 85-89.
- 34 Webb, “*Nomoi*,” 215-216 and note 16.
- 35 Webb, “*Nomoi*,” 219.
- 36 Orpheus is absent, along with Homer, undoubtedly because Plethon had just emphasized that poets are unreliable as guides to wisdom (*Nomoi* I.2 [Brague ed., 29]). See Tambrun-Krasker, *Μαγικὰ λόγια*, 46; Tambrun, “Marsile Ficini et le ‘Commentaire’,” 23-24; idem, *Pléthon*, 89.
- 37 Scholarios had noted this absence, and his explanation is probably close to the truth: “Proclus, whom you have used most of all, you mention not a single time, probably in order not to have to share the glory of your inventions with him” (Letter to the Exarch Joseph, see Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 89). In other words, Plethon was so dependent on Proclus that he preferred not to call attention to his influence.
- 38 For a systematic discussion of Plethon’s systematic inversion of the perspective of the patristic apologists, see Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 72-80.
- 39 Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 60-63.
- 40 Tambrun-Krasker, *Μαγικὰ λόγια*, 46; Tambrun, “Marsile Ficini et le ‘Commentaire’,” 22-23; idem, *Pléthon*, 53-104.
- 41 Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 80-81.
- 42 Dannenfeldt, “Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles,” 10-11.
- 43 Tambrun, “Marsile Ficini et le ‘Commentaire’,” 24, with reference to Cyril of Alexandria’s *Against Julian*.

- 44 Cf. Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 91.
- 45 Inclusive monotheism has room for a hierarchy of lower deities that do not detract from the ultimate unity of the One. It seems to me that the scholarly discussion about whether Plethon was a polytheist or not (Allen, *Synoptic Art*, 2 note 3 *contra* Masai, Woodhouse and others, to whom could now be added Tambrun, "Marsile Ficini et le 'Commentaire'," 25; idem, *Pléthon*, 85) can be easily resolved along these lines.
- 46 George of Trebizond, *Comparatio Platonis et Aristotelis*, fol. V63; translation Monfasani, "Platonic Paganism," 59-60 (with a few modifications; cf. Monfasani, *George of Trebizond*, 39-40, and discussion there; and idem, "Review," 119, with reference to Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 168).
- 47 See, e.g., Dannenfeldt, "Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles," 10; Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 78; Monfasani, "Platonic Paganism," 52; Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, vol. I, 73-82. A notable exception is James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1, 197-205; but I would agree with the refutation of his argument by Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, vol. I, 81-82.
- 48 Monfasani, "Platonic Paganism," 45-46; idem in Godwin, *Pagan Dream*, 1-2; Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 24 with note 51, 206-207 note 3 (against Edgar Wind's references to Ficino as a "neo-pagan thinker," in *Pagan Mysteries*, 68).
- 49 Monfasani, "Platonic Paganism," esp. 52 and 58.
- 50 In recent years, most specialists have emphasized this against earlier generations of scholarship: see Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, ix, 156-166; Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1, 207-208, and esp. "Pletho's Influence" in vol. 2, 436-440; Monfasani, "Platonic Paganism"; Tambrun, *Pléthon*, 16. Of particular importance is the simple fact that Plethon does not seem to have known Latin or Italian, and few of his alleged admirers would have been able to converse with him in Greek; any conversation or teaching, therefore, would have had to have taken place via interpreters, which seriously modifies the attractive picture of a Plethon freely discoursing about Plato within a circle of admiring pupils.
- 51 On this concept, see Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 1-22; *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*; and for the application to Western esotericism, cf. Hanegraaff, "Trouble with Images," 110-113.
- 52 Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, ix.
- 53 Peuckert, *Pansophie*, 10-11.
- 54 On George of Trebizond's megalomania and paranoid extremes, see Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, vol. 1, 167-174.
- 55 Letter to Princess Theodora Asesina, in Scholarios, *Oeuvres*, IV, 152-153; transl. Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*, 24.
- 56 Reuchlin, *De verbo mirifico* Bk. 2 (Ehlers et al. (eds.), 162-163).

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Astrologia Hermetica: **Astrology, Western Culture, and the Academy**

KOCKU VON STUCKRAD

How should we determine the place of astrology in Western culture? What is the status of astrology in the academy? These questions are intrinsically linked to each other because the dominant discourse that is operative in modern Western societies determines the research topics, the methodological preferences, and the symbolic capital that can be gained in the academy. With regard to the academic study of astrology, scholars who engage the history of this discipline are confronted with presumptions, prejudices, or misunderstandings more often than is the case with other topics in Western history. Often, implicitly or explicitly, it seems to be a question of belief or the lack thereof that determines the discourse on astrology in modern universities.

Scholars in Defense

This situation is the reason why many 19th- and 20th-century historians who focused their research on astrology seemed to feel the need to justify what they did. Auguste Bouché-Leclercq (1842–1924), for instance, ends the preface of his celebrated study of Greek astrology with the remark that it is perhaps not a simple waste of time to study things with which other people have wasted their time.¹ At the end of the 19th century, there was a widespread belief that European post-Enlightenment modernity had left astrological “superstition” behind for good, and that this discipline could now only be studied as a curiosity. This changed with Aby Warburg (1866–1929), whose legendary lecture in 1912 on the cycle of frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia and its astrological iconography suddenly moved astrology into the center of academic scrutiny.² With his study *Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeit* (1920)³ Warburg – and subsequently many scholars of the so-called Warburg School – paid attention to the important role of astrology in the Renaissance. He interpreted the Renaissance as a conscious revival of ancient paganism.

Other scholars of Warburg’s generation also made important contributions to our historical understanding of ancient astrology. Franz Cumont (1868–1947) and Franz Boll (1867–1923) collected and edited an incredible quantity of astrological manuscripts and fragments from the ancient Greek world in the *Corpus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*.⁴ Subsequently, Wilhelm Gundel and his son Hans Georg devoted their entire scholarly lives to the history of ancient astrology;⁵ and let us not forget Lynn Thorndike’s encyclopedic *History of Magic and Experimen-*

tal Science (1923–1958), which covers no fewer than 17 centuries. Thorndike and the other historians thus made accessible a cornucopia of primary sources that had been unknown or had not been taken seriously before. At the same time, many historians of science (including Thorndike) had difficulties interpreting astrological sources in a neutral way. Representing this scholarly bias, George Sarton, in a brief review of a book on Mandaean astrology, in 1950 dismissed the so-called “Book of the Zodiac” as “a wretched collection of omens, debased astrology and miscellaneous nonsense ultimately derived from Arabic, Greek, Persian and all the superstitious flotsam of the Near East.”⁶ Despite the famous one-page reply by Otto Neugebauer (1889–1990), published under the title “The Study of Wretched Subjects” in the scholarly journal *Isis*, and despite Neugebauer’s insistence on the importance of astrology for our understanding of the history of the natural sciences,⁷ this area of scholarly research remains somewhat wretched even today.

The problems related to the academic study of astrology were noted by Paul Feyerabend in his critique of the “Statement of 186 Leading Scientists” against astrology (1975), including 18 Nobel Prize winners.⁸ “The learned gentlemen have strong convictions, they use their authority to spread these convictions (why 186 signatures if one has arguments?), they know a few phrases which sound like arguments, but they certainly do not know what they are talking about.”⁹ To be sure, Feyerabend did not intend his critique to be a defense of modern astrology: “It is interesting to see how closely both parties approach each other in ignorance, conceit and the wish for easy power over minds.”¹⁰

Steven vanden Broecke has this in mind when he tells the story of his first academic paper, devoted to an unknown astrological instrument that he had studied for months. One of the historians in the audience responded to that paper with the exclamation: “Do you believe in this? This is rubbish! Charlatanism!” Vanden Broecke correctly notes that this type of interruption highlights the problematic position of astrology “in virtually any grand narrative of the history of Western science.” Although cultural historians have established the importance of astrology in early modern Europe,

this does not seem to have convinced many historians of science that the topic might be relevant to *their* concerns. We still need an approach to early modern astrology that confirms its omnipresence and flexibility, but explores its intimate ties with other “scientific” disciplines like natural philosophy, medicine, or astronomy as well.¹¹

This is an important observation that I will return to later. But let me also call in Tamsyn Barton here who, like vanden Broecke, belongs to the generation of scholars that is following Neugebauer; Barton no longer feels the need to justify what she is doing.

[I]n this book there will be no prizes awarded for scientific achievement to any particular person or group, nor censure for those who fail to match up to modern ideals of science. Indeed, I think that the old tendency to see astrology as a pseudo-science is an anachronistic diversion from the more fruitful enquiry into how astrology functioned in antiquity.¹²

More recently, a few scholars have even gone one step further and combine their historical work with a critique of modern scientific culture, which sometimes makes them advocates of astrology.¹³ It may be doubted, however, whether advocacy is a better academic position than condemnation.

Be this as it may, the reluctance of modern historians to recognize astrology as an important element of European cultural history and the struggles between natural scientists and astrologers about the legitimacy of astrology are interesting elements of modern discourse, worthy of investigation. It may even be argued that it is *this* dialectic that is the main object of research for scholars of esotericism, even if such an “object” is located on a meta-level of historical structures. At stake here are not only historical facts but also identities. Pushing astrology to the margins of natural science or rationality confirms modern views that like to see Western identity as enlightened, rational, and immune from its “pagan past.”¹⁴

Astrology and the “Occult Sciences”

The discourses of inclusion and exclusion that accompany processes of modern identity formation have also affected the way scholars have described the status of astrology. Besides labels such as “pseudo-science” or “superstition,” astrology has often been called an “occult science.” This term probably originated in the 16th century,¹⁵ along with notions of *occulta philosophia*. “Occult,” in this context, refers to hidden or secret powers that inform a substantial part of the disciplines lumped together under the rubric “occult sciences” – notably astrology, alchemy, and (natural) magic.¹⁶ Twentieth-century scholars transformed this rubric from an emic (an “insider’s”) into an etic (an “outsider’s”) category, indicating a “unity” of these various disciplines. While Keith Thomas believed that astrology formed the basis of the occult sciences – and that consequently the “decline” of astrology would inevitably lead to the decline of magic and alchemy – Brian Vickers encouraged this tendency by arguing that all “occult sciences” share a common “mentality” that is clearly distinguished from a rational “scientific” one.¹⁷

Such a distinction is problematic for several reasons. First, although these disciplines overlap in varied and complex ways, all of them have distinct histories with quite different and complex, mutually interacting trajectories. “Even during the heyday of Renaissance Neoplatonism, astrology and alchemy lived independent lives, despite the vast inkwells devoted to the rhetorical embellishment of occult philosophy.”¹⁸ Second, there are other disciplines and practices that had direct and longstanding links to astrology, especially mathematics, philosophy (natural and moral), medicine, historiography, theology, and politics.

Configuring astrology with the other so-called “occult sciences” tends strongly to distort our understanding of its relationship with these other areas of knowledge. Third, the analytical notion of “hidden powers” continues to remain important within the more “legitimate” sciences from the scientific revolution to the present. Fourth, it is difficult to demonstrate the irrationality – or, even more difficult, the irrational “mentality” – of astrology; as *ars mathematica*, part of the classical arts in university curricula until the 17th century, the discipline of astrology was based on empirical and rational methods of argumentation.¹⁹

That astrology was subsumed under the artificial category “occult sciences” has to do, as I have already noted, with the formation of modern identities that seek to distance themselves from these disciplines. Over against this categorization it is important to note that, until the 18th century, astrology was intrinsically linked to astronomy, mathematics, natural philosophy, and medicine.²⁰ We can even say that it is on the interfaces of science, philosophy, religion, and other cultural systems. that the status of astrology in European history has to be determined.

What about Esotericism and Hermeticism?

Why then, study astrology as part of Hermeticism or Western esotericism? If astrology is closely linked to the history of science, to natural philosophy, and to other cultural domains, it is difficult to escape the impression that connecting it to “esotericism” is nothing more than a prolongation of the post-Enlightenment program to secure astrology’s otherness. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere,²¹ the entire field of the study of esotericism should be more open to or even integrated into an analysis of the dynamics that have shaped European history of culture. But even if we take this observation as our point of departure, there is more to say about astrology, esotericism, and Hermeticism.

If we conceptualize esotericism as a discourse of perfect knowledge that addresses a dialectic of concealment and revelation, astrology can serve as a means to unlock the hidden knowledge of the universe and to grant the human being perfect understanding of the ultimate meaning of the world and its history. An example of this esoteric reading of the meaning of time is the concept of the so-called Great Conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn. Elaborated by Abū Ma’shar in the 9th century, this theory was subsequently applied to Shiite, Jewish, and Christian apocalyptic speculation.²² However, we should not forget that the best astrologers have never claimed that astrology offers perfect understanding or knowledge; rather, astrology has usually been understood to be conjectural or probable knowledge. We can conclude that the use of astrological conjecture in discourses of perfect knowledge is not necessarily an astrological use anymore.

A similar observation can be made when it comes to Hermeticism. There is no reason to assume that astrology “as such” is “Hermetic,” or that there are intrinsic links between astrology and Hermeticism.²³ On the other hand, Hermes Trismegistus has figured prominently in the legitimization of astrological doctrines from antiquity through the 20th century. Early on, Mercury, Hermes, or

Hermes-That were significant representatives of astral knowledge. Subsequently, Jews combined this tradition with their understanding of Enoch and Metatron as revelatory entities that knew “the secrets of the heavens”; Muslims, for their part, blended this idea with the figure of Idris. The result is a rich and complex literary, iconographic,²⁴ and magical tradition that centered on the figure of Hermes as the revealer of astrological knowledge. Interestingly enough, the authority of Hermes Trismegistus was so strong that leading scholars of the scientific revolution still legitimated their new astronomical models with reference to him. Nicolaus Copernicus, for instance, in the tenth chapter of his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (1543), justified the importance of the sun as the center of the universe with the conviction of the “Thrice Greatest” that the sun was a “visible god.”²⁵

The example of Copernicus shows how problematic it is to approach esotericism and Hermeticism as “marginal” or “suppressed” parts of Western culture. When scholars today conceptualize Western esotericism with reference to traditions that have been neglected or marginalized by “mainstream” culture, they are – unwillingly, to be sure – part of a discursive formation that has taken shape over the past three hundred years. This discourse is characterized by what I call a “strategy of distancing,” or a “process of disjunction.”²⁶ As scholars, we should not apply the rhetoric of synecdoche here and take relatively recent phenomena as representing “the West” in all its history.²⁷ Thus, let me end these brief reflections with the suggestion that in the future we study astrology as part of philosophy, science, mathematics, medicine, historiography, art, and religion; only when it comes to the revelation of hidden, perfect knowledge by means of astrological methods does it make sense to talk of esoteric astrology.

Notes

- 1 “On voudra bien ne pas prendre pour un paradoxe ma conclusion: à savoir, qu’on ne perd pas son temps en recherchant à quoi d’autres ont perdu le leur” (Bouché-Leclercq, *L’astrologie grecque*, ix).
- 2 See Warburg, “Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie.”
- 3 See Warburg, “Heidnisch-antike Weissagung.”
- 4 Other influential contributions include Cumont, *L’Égypte des astrologues*, and Boll, *Sphaera*.
- 5 See particularly Gundel and Gundel, *Astrologumena*, which still is a standard work.
- 6 Sarton and Siegel, “Seventy-Sixth Critical Bibliography.”
- 7 See also Neugebauer, *Exact Sciences in Antiquity*.
- 8 Anonymous, “Objections to Astrology.”
- 9 Feyerabend, “The Strange Case of Astrology,” 91.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 96.
- 11 Vanden Broecke, *Limits of Influence*, 1 (*italics original*).
- 12 Barton, *Ancient Astrology*, 7.
- 13 Cf., for instance, Roy Willis’ and Patrick Curry’s position “that astrology is

best understood as a divinatory technique: a dialogue with the divine in a postmodern, post-Christian, and newly reanimated, universe" (Willis and Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture*, 1). Cf. also Curry's controversial notion of the "truth of astrology" in Curry, "Historiography of Astrology," 270.

- 14 See Zika, *Exorcizing Our Demons*, 4. This mechanism is also discussed and illustrated in von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*.
- 15 Secret, "Du 'De Occulta Philosophia' à l'occultisme du XIXème siècle," 7.
- 16 In an influential work, Wayne Shumaker (*Occult Sciences in the Renaissance*) also adds witchcraft to this mélange.
- 17 Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 631-632; Vickers, "On the Function of Analogy in the Occult," 286; see also Vickers (ed.), *Occult and Scientific Mentalities*.
- 18 Newman and Grafton, "Introduction," 26; see the entire passage, pp. 18-27.
- 19 I dealt with this topic in my *Geschichte der Astrologie* in more detail; see the index for "Empirie" and "Astrologie und wissenschaftliche Methode." See also Thorndike, "The True Place of Astrology."
- 20 See, for instance, Rutkin, "Astrology, Natural Philosophy and the History of Science"; Azzolini, "Reading Health in the Stars"; see also von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie, passim*.
- 21 Von Stuckrad, "Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion," 232-233. This article represents my latest view regarding the discussion on "esotericism." See also von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, chapters 1-3.
- 22 See von Stuckrad, "Interreligious Transfers in the Middle Ages," 42-45.
- 23 The only exception is perhaps the doctrine of correspondences that is a basic theory of astrology (even if a causal relationship between objects is assumed, see von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, 16) and at the same time is reminiscent of the alleged Hermetic doctrine of "as above so below."
- 24 The iconographic tradition of the zodiac in the Muslim Middle Ages has been studied by Caiozzo, *Images du ciel d'Orient au Moyen Âge*, with many references to Hermes.
- 25 See von Stuckrad, *Geschichte der Astrologie*, 255.
- 26 The disjunctive strategies artificially distinguished astrology from astronomy, alchemy from chemistry, magic from science, etc. Self-evident as these disjunctions may seem to the modern reader, they are, in fact, of quite recent origin.
- 27 For a critique of these approaches to Western esotericism, see von Stuckrad, "Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion," 229-230.

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The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects

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When I moved to Amsterdam in 2004 for my new position at the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, one of the tasks I had to face was the organization of the master course focusing on the late modern period, entitled “Occult Trajectories.” I was, of course, free to adapt it to my own research interests, but the course was generally meant to offer some solid, advanced knowledge on the developments of esotericism in the period that goes from the 18th century to our days. Soon enough, the idea occurred to me that I could use this opportunity to make a survey of the ways in which esotericism had interacted during that period with the environing society and culture. Every year I would focus on a different aspect. At the end of this cycle not only would I have a better grasp of the historical development of late-modern esotericism – which would help me contextualize my research on particular subjects – but I would also have enough material to write a general introduction to the history of Western esotericism in the late-modern period. In my first five years in Amsterdam, I have devoted my courses to the following subjects: Orientalism,¹ magic, feminism and gender, politics, literature, and visual arts. In the coming years, I plan to continue this project by focusing further on a certain number of aspects, after which the cycle will be closed and I will draw my conclusions, hopefully producing the book I have had in mind since the beginning. More than halfway through the cycle, some conclusions can be drawn about the ways in which esotericism has interacted with modern Western society and culture. In what follows, I will focus on some of them by discussing, in particular, the role played by occultist organizations.²

Occultism and Politics

Esotericism and occultism have often been associated with right-wing, reactionary politics and with irrationalism.³ The association has been made authoritative by Theodor Adorno in his *Theses against Occultism*, originally written in 1947 and then included in his *Minima Moralia*, published in 1950.⁴ But Adorno was not the only one, or even the first, to make this association in the immediate years after the Second World War. To give but one other significant example, George Orwell had made a similar point in an essay on William Butler Yeats, first published in 1946, but actually written in 1943.⁵ As is well known, not only did Yeats have a life-long passion for the occult, but in the years following the First World War he also showed a marked sympathy for the then emerging European fascist

movements.⁶ Before Orwell, another well-known English author, W.H. Auden, had expressed his puzzlement about Yeats' passion for the occult, in an essay published in the *Partisan Review* in 1939, shortly after Yeats' death.⁷ However, Orwell was perhaps the first to establish a clear link between Yeats' private occult interests and his right-wing political sympathies, and therefore to make, at the same time, a general point about the intrinsic connection between occultism and fascism. In his essay, Orwell argued that there are at least three aspects by which the relationship between the "hatred of democracy"⁸ (as expressed by reactionary political ideas) and occultism could be explained.

First of all, Orwell links the "hate [for] the concept of human equality"⁹ to theories of cyclical time, supposedly widespread in occultism. To believe that everything has already happened, and that everything will return again in the future, makes the belief in real progress impossible, and science along with it. Now, it is true that cyclical theories of time have been particularly influential in Western esotericism between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries (for instance, within the Theosophical movement or within perennialism). After the First World War, Yeats had developed his own cyclical theory, which he expounded in *A Vision* (1925, 1937). Yet, Orwell's argument, when generalized, does not appear particularly convincing. On the one hand, not all manifestations of occultism, understood as a historical current (let alone esotericism as a whole), are based on a cyclical notion of time; and, on the other hand, the direct connection of cyclical theories with right-wing politics is not immediately cogent or evident.

Secondly, occultism seems inextricably linked to elitism:

... the very concept of occultism carries with it the idea that knowledge must be a secret thing, limited to a small circle of initiates. But the same idea is integral to Fascism. Those who dread the prospect of universal suffrage, popular education, freedom of thought, emancipation of women, will start off with a predilection towards secret cults.¹⁰

If one accepts the idea that knowledge and power are strictly related – and it should be noted here that esotericists are generally inclined to share that view – this argument seems to be more convincing, because evidence of elitist notions of knowledge in Western esotericism is certainly not hard to find.

The third aspect seems to be added by Orwell almost as an afterthought, and is not really explored further: "There is another link between Fascism and magic in the profound hostility of both to the Christian ethical code."¹¹ This time again the argument, if it can perhaps be applied convincingly to Yeats' specific case (and even of this I am not sure), appears on the whole relatively weak. In the first place, Orwell does not explain in what sense fascism would necessarily lead to hostility towards Christianity. In fact, several historical forms of fascism have been far from developing hostility towards Christian churches and their "ethical code."¹² Secondly, as we shall see, the relationship between occultism and Christianity is much more complex than a mere straightforward attitude of rejection.

Apart from the specifics of Orwell's arguments, most interesting here is his idea that a person who would endorse progressive social and political ideas (freedom of thought, emancipation of women, etc.), could hardly be an occultist at the same time. Orwell's position in that regard is not too far from that of Adorno, who also postulates this inextricable connection between occultism, irrationalism and fascism. The underlying idea is that occultism is necessarily opposed to the project of Enlightenment, of reason, of progress, and of democracy – in a word, of modernity. This idea can be seen as the expression of feelings that were widespread enough in the late 1940s and in the 1950s, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, when the desire to understand “what had gone wrong” with Western civilization was understandably urgent and pressing. Thereafter, the association has stuck in the minds of many more or less progressive intellectuals, and has become almost an automatic reflex – so much so, that it is still quite influential today. To quote but one significant example, Umberto Eco has insisted in several of his publications and public utterances on the intimate relationship between fascism and esotericism, and, by extension, on the cultural, social, and political threat posed by the latter.¹³

At this point, a few general remarks are in order. The identification of esotericism/occultism with the evils of right-wing totalitarianism could be interpreted, among other things, as a reactivation of an old polemical discourse in a new form. As an absolute evil from which Western civilization could only hope to emancipate itself, but the return of which was still perceived as an ominous threat, it was perhaps natural to associate fascism with what for centuries has been perceived as inherently mischievous and illegitimate.¹⁴ Both fascism and esotericism could therefore be seen as symptoms of the same evil, a recurring disease from which Western civilization should protect itself.

If we accept this interpretation, we will tend to see the association between esotericism and fascism as a form of projection, not necessarily founded on actual empirical/historical evidence. But the reality seems to be more complex than that. On the one hand, some of the arguments put forward by authors such as Orwell cannot be so easily dismissed. The idea that knowledge is – or must be – restricted to a small elite of initiates is certainly a recurring theme in the history of esotericism, and makes the allegation of elitism plausible. On the other hand, the problem can also be seen on a more strictly historical level. In fact, it seems indisputable that certain esoteric currents and authors were attracted, in the period between the two wars, to strongly conservative, and, in some cases, even authoritarian and/or totalitarian, political positions.¹⁵ If one were to focus on this period and on these currents or authors alone, it would be hard to resist the temptation to see an obvious link between esotericism and right-wing radicalism in what would appear to be a common opposition to the modernization, secularization, and democratization of Western society and culture.

However, such a perception would be challenged by a significant amount of historical counter-evidence, which is easily available to any researcher willing to broaden his perspective and include other periods or contexts in his analysis. Hence, the mutual attraction of esotericism and right-wing radicalism would

appear to be a contingent *reorientation* of the political color of esotericism, rather than an inherent, structural necessity. In the rest of this contribution, I will offer a short overview of this evidence, in particular for what concerns the period between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and in the context of occultist organizations, especially in England.

New Perspectives on Occultism and Modernity

First of all, it should be noted that scholarly perspectives on occultism and its cultural and/or social implications have changed considerably over the past ten years due to new historical research. If we consider, for instance, James Webb's pioneering studies on the history of Western esotericism in the 19th and 20th centuries, we may note that his perspective was still close to that of Adorno and Orwell. His two important books on the subject, *The Occult Establishment* and *The Occult Underground*, belonged to a common project whose title was *The Flight from Reason*.¹⁶ This title in itself would suffice to show Webb's underlying assumption about the nature of the revival of occult ideas in the 19th century. For Webb, 19th-century esotericism was nothing but

an unexpected reaction against the very method [of the Age of Reason] which had brought success, a wild return to archaic forms of belief, and among the intelligentsia a sinister concentration on superstitions which had been thought buried.¹⁷

In *The Occult Underground*, Webb shows how this reaction could lead, in the following century, to a dangerous liaison with fascism and anti-Semitism.

Since the 1970s, when Webb's books were first published, many things have changed. As the present volume attests, the historical study of Western esotericism has increasingly found its place in academic institutions. In recent years, new research has shown that, if Adorno's and Orwell's visions of occultism may not have been completely "wrong," they were at the very least one-sided and partial. An important book published in 1994 by the Anglo-American scholar Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, showed (as the title already suggests) the extent to which 19th-century esotericism had assimilated ideas belonging to the cultural legacy of the Enlightenment. This made it clear that the history of esotericism in the late-modern period could not be understood only in the simplistic terms of a "reaction" to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. A similar point was made, a couple of years later, by Wouter Hanegraaff in his *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, which showed how late-modern esotericism had tried to "come to terms" with the scientific, rational, and secular culture of its age, and how this relationship could not always be understood as conflictual or hostile.¹⁸ Since then, a significant number of studies has been published that have led to a new understanding of the complex interaction between esotericism and modern culture, in different periods and linguistic areas. In general, they have focused on spiritualism, psychical research, and occultism.¹⁹ There have

also been more ambitious attempts, such as Olav Hammer's *Claiming Knowledge*, at elucidating certain aspects of the underlying mechanism of this interaction, based on the occultists' elaboration of particular cultural strategies in order to adapt to the historical transformations of Western culture.²⁰

Occultist Sociability

We can now proceed to examine in what ways occultism, through the creation of particular groups and societies, may have developed its complex relationship with modernity. The turn of the 20th century saw a remarkable development of occult and esoteric organizations. One of the most famous of these was, of course, the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 in New York by a Russian *émigrée*, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, together with some other persons who shared her passion for the occult. In 1888, another important group, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, was created in England. Unlike the Theosophical Society, this group was focused more on magical practices and on the idea of a Western esoteric tradition as distinct from, and not inferior to, an Eastern one. These two groups were only the most famous and successful among many others, and the rise of occult organizations in the second half of the 19th century is of particular interest not only to the historian of esotericism, but also to any cultural historian focusing on that period.

Obviously, I will not dwell here on the history or the structure of these groups, on which an abundant amount of literature is now available.²¹ Of more immediate interest for us is the fact that, at the turn of the 20th century, these occult organizations offered a social space where new conceptions of culture and society could be formulated and experimented with. This would be in itself a good reason – if there were no other – to argue that occultism, as part of the larger historical body of esotericism, has contributed significantly to the shaping of modernity, verging, in this case, rather towards the progressive, liberal pole of the cultural and political spectrum. Interestingly enough, W.B. Yeats – who is presented by Orwell, not without good reason, as an obvious example of the intimate connection between fascism and occultism – was deeply and actively involved both in the Theosophical Society and in the Order of the Golden Dawn. This would seem to confirm my suggestion that the connection between occultism and fascism was not so much a matter of structural necessity, but rather of a contingent, idiosyncratic process of reorientation that took place – for reasons yet to be investigated – in the period around the First World War.

I see at least five respects in which the sociability of occultism offered a space for cultural and social experimentation: gender, body and sexuality, the self, colonialism, religion. I would like now to focus briefly on each of them.

1. Gender

It is important to be aware of the fact that in the last quarter of the 19th century – the same period in which these occultist organizations were created – an influential movement for the emancipation of women was taking shape in England and elsewhere.²² It was in 1889 that Ibsen's *A Doll's House* premiered in London, and its message of uncompromising feminine emancipation made an enormous impression. As has been remarked by an acute historian of that period, "Nora's final slamming of her husband's door echoed through social life for a decade."²³ The "New Woman" of late-Victorian feminism, as epitomized by Nora, seemed to be fairly represented in Anglo-American occultism, where women played a very significant role.²⁴ Several of them could indeed claim to have slammed, perhaps even literally, their husbands' doors, such as H. P. Blavatsky, Anna Kingsford, or Lady Caithness.²⁵

This consonance of occultism with contemporary feminism had undoubtedly been prepared by the prominence women had already enjoyed in the spiritualist movement, where feminist ideas were widespread enough.²⁶ However, it could be argued that occultism went even further. After all, the role of women in spiritualism was often (but with some significant exceptions) reduced to that of passive mediums. In Anglo-American occultism, on the other hand, not only were women freely admitted as members in organizations such as the Theosophical Society and the Order of the Golden Dawn, but they very often held positions of responsibility, if not even leadership. In this sense, the impact of H.P. Blavatsky's work could hardly be overestimated.²⁷ Even if her invisible masters – the famous Mahatmas – are invariably men, it is under Blavatsky's own name that her works appeared and it is especially with her person that the doctrines of Theosophy were associated. Blavatsky, together with her friend and associate Henry Steel Olcott, seems to be at the origin of a certain stereotype – the dominant woman accompanied by a male partner – that will recur again and again in the history of the Theosophical movement. Suffice it to mention here, for instance, the couple formed by Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, or by Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater. But the Theosophical Society was not the only group where the role of women was crucial. In the Golden Dawn, too, women achieved, at least in certain occasions, positions of authority and leadership.²⁸

The exceptional status that women enjoyed in these occult organizations had several implications, which worked at different levels. On the one hand, groups such as the Theosophical Society or the Golden Dawn offered a space where not only men and women worked together, under conditions of equality, for a common goal, but also where women could experiment with positions of authority and power that were denied to them in society at large. On the other hand, an occult group such as the Golden Dawn could also function as a sort of educational institution. In fact, one should not forget that, at the time, women's access to universities was still very limited, if it was possible at all. Joining an esoteric society such as the Theosophical Society or the Golden Dawn could be an alternative way of cultivating one's own intellectual curiosities and interests.

In sum, in the restricted, protected space of an occult group, women could play roles and do things for which society at large did not yet seem to be prepared.

2. *Body and sexuality*

Related to the issue of gender, but also distinct from it, is the attitude towards the body and towards sexuality. The turn of the century marked a shift in how the body was appreciated. Concerns for hygiene and health became more widespread, and, in Germany, the movement of *Lebensreform* took shape, with its insistence on the importance of a return to nature, in order to abandon industrialization and the bad habits of urban, civilized life. This led to the development of, among other things, naturism and nudism, and to a concern with new alimentary regimes, including vegetarianism.²⁹

Outside of the realm of esotericism, this change of mentality is aptly represented by a philosopher such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who preached the importance of rediscovering the Dionysian elements within Western culture, which he perceived as having been neglected, if not repressed, by Christianity for centuries.³⁰ Nietzsche, as well as several occultists, held Christianity responsible for the repression that, in their view, kept in check, or even prevented, a healthier relationship with nature.³¹ According to them, this healthier attitude had been present in Pagan religions, prior to the rise of Christianity. This explains why certain occultists tended to adopt certain forms of neo-paganism within their systems of thought and practice.

It could be argued that in occult groups such as the Golden Dawn, an attention for the body was already intrinsic to the kind of ritual work that was being practiced. Unlike mainstream freemasonry, in this case both men and women participated in the rituals. It is certainly no coincidence that several members of the Order were theater actors by profession, including one of the most prominent women among its membership, Florence Farr.

Still, it would appear that both in the Theosophical Society and in the Golden Dawn there was a sort of ambivalent attitude towards sexuality, divided between an emphasis on celibacy on the one hand, and more daring attempts at uniting sex with the search for spiritual enlightenment, on the other.³² It is in other groups, such as the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor (created around 1884), and the Ordo Templi Orientis (created around 1910), and especially due to the influence of a crucial figure such as Paschal Beverly Randolph, that this search took a form that was more explicit and straightforward, with the development of special magical teachings and techniques in which sex played a fundamental role.³³ Figures such as Aleister Crowley developed certain forms of sexual magic, which strongly challenged the norms of bourgeois morality.³⁴ In this context, sex could be used for other purposes than procreation, even outside the traditional bonds of marriage. The higher spiritual value attributed to these practices could prevent the occultists from having feelings of guilt while engaging in them.

3. *The self*

The development of occult groups at the turn of the century coincided, of course, with another very important cultural phenomenon: the birth of psychoanalysis. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, which is usually seen as marking the beginning of this movement, was published in 1900. Several scholars have shown how some of the cultural premises of psychoanalysis had their roots in animal magnetism and mesmerism.³⁵ This movement, which originated from Franz Anton Mesmer's medical theories in the second half of the 18th century, had highlighted the problems of the classical psychological models, like the Cartesian one, by showing the possibility of accessing dimensions of consciousness for which then current theories could not provide an explanation.

To some extent, the occult practices of the Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn, and other occult groups were also a particular development of the ideas and practices of animal magnetism – a development that had, of course, followed a very different trajectory from that of psychoanalysis. But it is possible to observe in occultism, as in psychoanalysis, a desire to explore deeper layers of self, that is, regions of consciousness unavailable to man under normal conditions.³⁶ Several of the “magical” techniques taught in the Golden Dawn, such as astral projection, could also be interpreted as explorations of the self. This explains why several occultists were particularly receptive to the new theories of psychoanalysis and why they were very keen on developing complex psychological theories in which the idea of a “Higher Self” played an important role. The analogies between this idea and the unconscious of psychoanalysis perhaps make the cultural role played by occultism in the last quarter of the 19th century more interesting than has thus far been assumed.

4. *Colonialism*

The end of the 19th century was also the apex of European colonialism. At that time, not only did England rule a considerable part of the globe, but, more specifically, it also ruled two lands that were traditionally considered to be the cradle of esoteric wisdom, Egypt and India. In this period, Orientalism served to create a framework in which the knowledge derived from the study of these countries, their exotic cultures, their histories, and their religious doctrines, could be assimilated and understood by Westerners.³⁷ This framework reinforced the idea of a deep, fundamental distinction between the “West” and the “East”, which were understood as having clearly separate identities.³⁸ In the context of groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn, occultists assimilated this distinction between East and West, and then made separate choices about the superiority of the one over the other. If the Golden Dawn was part of what has been called the “Hermetic reaction,”³⁹ and showed therefore an “Occidentalist” bias in the construction of its esoteric system, the Theosophical Society, on the other hand, manifested an opposite attitude.⁴⁰ It is important to remember that Theosophists generally opted for the primacy of an Eastern esoteric tradition over a Western one. This had interesting implications, because it led them also

to relativize the superiority of the West as a whole, including the latter's right to politically and militarily dominate regions that were perceived as much more advanced culturally and spiritually.

5. Religion

In England, the rise and the early development of these occult groups coincides with the final period of the Victorian age, which has often been associated with a crisis of religious beliefs.⁴¹ Evangelicalism, which had dominated the religious landscape during the early part of the Victorian age, was now seriously challenged, and entered into a deep crisis. The historian Robert Ensor has observed that there were at least three factors to consider in this crisis: the development of the movement of Anglo-Catholicism within the Anglican church, the new discoveries of science (the most famous example being, of course, the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, 1859), and hedonism, that is, the rejection of the social model of austerity and seriousness associated with Puritanism and evangelicalism.⁴² To these three we may add occultism. One of the most important aspects of the challenge that occultism offered to evangelicalism, even when it did not wish to depart radically from Christianity (as is the case with authors such as Aleister Crowley), was its non-literal, anti-dogmatic reading of the sacred texts. Actually, this put it at odds not only with evangelicalism, but also with most other traditional forms of Christianity. This hermeneutical approach had of course already a long tradition in esotericism, and, in the context of English occultism, we find it clearly expressed by such authors as Anna Kingsford. As Joscelyn Godwin remarks: "The Christianity of Kingsford's illuminations was not historically based, did not regard Jesus as the only Son of God or as a personal savior, and did not pretend that the Christian revelation was unique or superior to all other religions."⁴³ By this attitude towards Christianity, occultism was effectively contributing to the relativization of the Christian revelation, which no longer had a unique status among other religious traditions. Far from representing a conservative or reactionary religious attitude, in this case occultism should rather be seen as serving – consciously or not – the cause of the incipient secularization.

Concluding Remarks

This short survey of Anglo-American occultism based on these five areas should at the very least give an idea of how complex the relationship between esotericism and modernity was at the turn of the 20th century. I have focused on a very specific context, that of Anglo-American occultist organizations at the end of the 19th century, but it is important to keep in mind that much of what I have argued about them would also be true for other contexts and movements, particularly spiritualism during the second half of the same century. What is clear in the specific cases I have discussed here is that occultist organizations such as the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn offered, among other things, a virtu-

al space for social and cultural experimentation and innovation. Their particular characteristics, which included a certain amount of secrecy, made this experimentation less problematic than it would have been otherwise. The results of their activities have put occultists at odds with general society not because they lagged behind its modern developments, but, on the contrary, because they were sometimes anticipating them. This of course clashes with the opinion we have seen expressed by such authoritative thinkers as Adorno. The idea put forward by Orwell immediately after the Second World War, according to which esotericists must necessarily “dread the prospect of universal suffrage, popular education, freedom of thought, emancipation of women,” can no longer convince anyone who has studied the history of 19th-century esotericism.

As far as occultist organizations are concerned, it seems clear that they possessed an intellectual openness which mainstream institutions, just because they were “large,” or because they represented at least larger interests, could not afford. If this is true, then the idea that there is a natural incompatibility between esotericism and the legacy of the Enlightenment, and a necessary, unavoidable connection between esotericism and fascism, becomes historically untenable. In the future, it will be necessary to explore these intricate issues further, with the obvious awareness that no easy answer will allow us to capture the complexity of occultism as a historical phenomenon.

Notes

- 1 While fully belonging to the cycle, this course was exceptionally offered as a Bachelor course.
- 2 In using the term occultism I refer to a specific current within Western esotericism that began to develop around the middle of the 19th century and continues, with various transformations, to our days. I have presented an overview of this current in my entry for the *Brill Dictionary of Religion*: Pasi, “Occultism.”
- 3 In this case, I use the two terms – esotericism and occultism – interchangeably, because this reflects the fuzziness with which they are often used in non-specialist literature. The problem is obviously not purely terminological, but also conceptual.
- 4 Adorno, “Theses against Occultism.” For a critical analysis of this important text see Versluis, *The New Inquisitions*, 95-104. See also the discussion in Wasserstrom, “Adorno’s Kabbalah,” 66-69.
- 5 Orwell, “W.B. Yeats.” Either implicitly or explicitly, some authors had made this association between occultism and right-wing totalitarianism even before the war (a case in point is the notorious book by Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks*, first published in 1939), but it is not my aim here to retrace this historical lineage in detail.
- 6 Already in the 1920s, Yeats developed an admiration for Mussolini and Italian fascism, in which it is also possible to perceive the influence of his younger friend Ezra Pound. Yeats also flirted, albeit for a relatively short

period of time, with a pseudo-fascist movement that was created in the 1930s in his own native Ireland: Eoin O'Duffy's Army Comrades Association, also known as the "Blueshirts." See Foster, W.B. *Yeats*, passim but esp. 358 and 466-495; and North, *The Political Aesthetic*, 70-73.

- 7 See Auden, "The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats," 4-5.
- 8 Orwell, "W.B. Yeats," 117.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., 118. It is interesting to note that this same quotation was used a couple of years after the publication of Orwell's book by T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbins as an epigraph to his *Mona Lisa's Mustache*, a fascinating (but now practically forgotten) indictment of modern art. In this case, the association between occultism and fascism was used as a starting point for a scathing criticism of the most recent tendencies in modern art.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Historical fascisms were often seen by various European Christian denominations as a possible bulwark against atheist Bolshevism, which was perceived during the inter-war period as a very urgent threat. In several European countries Fascist regimes were able to establish relationships of collaboration and coexistence with the dominant Christian denomination(s). The most obvious example is perhaps the Italian fascist regime, which, in 1929, reached an agreement (the so called "Lateran pact") with the Catholic Church. This settled the conflict that began with the unification of Italy and the conquest of Rome in 1870 and was highly appreciated by the Catholic hierarchy. In other cases, such as in Spain and Portugal, the local dictatorships of Franco and Salazar presented themselves as explicitly supporting the Catholic Church and its values. For comparative discussions of European fascisms that also address these aspects, see Corni, *Fascismo e fascismi*; and Davies and Lynch, *The Routledge Companion to Fascism*.
- 13 Several texts could be quoted in this respect, but probably the most significant one (almost a manifesto) is Eco's "Ur-Fascism." Even his famous novel, *Foucault's Pendulum*, could be read from this perspective.
- 14 W.J. Hanegraaff has shown how the image of esotericism in Western culture is strictly linked to a long-lasting polemical discourse. See Hanegraaff, "Forbidden Knowledge"; idem, "The Trouble with Images," and idem, "La nascita dell'esoterismo."
- 15 An example that immediately comes to mind is perennialism, whose general anti-modern tendency led some of the authors associated with it to hold strongly reactionary views, and sometimes even to manifest sympathy for fascist regimes (as in the case of one of its most significant and influential representatives, Julius Evola). On the political aspects of perennialism, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*. But examples could also be given of esotericists coming from different perspectives or belonging to other currents. Apart from the obvious case of Yeats, to which we have already referred, one could mention here Aleister Crowley, whose ambiguous at-

titudes towards the rise of various 20th-century totalitarianisms I have analyzed in my *Aleister Crowley und die Versuchung der Politik*, esp. 109-126.

- 16 Webb, *The Flight from Reason* (in other editions the title is *The Occult Underground*); and idem, *The Occult Establishment*.
- 17 Webb, *The Flight from Reason*, x.
- 18 See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, in particular 411-513. I have myself tried to focus on these and similar problems with respect to a particular author, Aleister Crowley, whose central role in the history of occultism makes him a valid vantage point for a broader discussion of them. See Pasi, *Aleister Crowley und die Versuchung der Politik*; but also idem, "L'anticristianesimo in Aleister Crowley"; and idem, "Lo yoga in Aleister Crowley."
- 19 To mention only the most recent and significant literature, in chronological order of publication: Baßler and Châtellier (eds.), *Mystique, mysticisme et modernité* (on occultism, mysticism and spiritualism in Germany); Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking* (on psychical research); Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* (on occultism in England); Treitel, *A Science for the Soul* (on occultism and spiritualism in Germany); Gutierrez (ed.), *The Occult in Nineteenth-Century America* (on mesmerism, spiritualism, and occultism in the United States); Sharp, *Secular Spirituality* (on spiritism in France); Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith* (on mesmerism, spiritism, and occultism in France). A counter-example is perhaps offered by Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, who, on the contrary, tries to confirm the stereotype of esotericism as a prelude to, or a natural associate of, fascism by focusing on what he considers to be the predominant esoteric tradition in France, namely Martinism.
- 20 See Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*.
- 21 For succinct but reliable bibliographies on these and other related subjects, I refer to the relevant entries in Hanegraaff et al. (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*.
- 22 On the history of women and feminism in the 19th century, see Fraisse and Perrot (eds.), *A History of Women*. For the history of feminism in England, see Caine, *English Feminism*, and, more specifically for the Victorian period, Levine, *Victorian Feminism*; and Caine, *Victorian Feminists*.
- 23 Ensor, *England*, 339.
- 24 For an overview of the relationship between English occultism and feminism, see Basham, *The Trial of Woman*. See also Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 85-98, which includes a more general discussion on occultism and gender.
- 25 I have discussed Lady Caithness in relation to some of her extraordinary ideas about biblical exegesis and, more generally, to occultist sexuality in Pasi, "Exégèse et sexualité."
- 26 On the role of women in the spiritualist movement in America, see Braude, *Radical Spirits*; in England, Owen, *The Darkened Room*.
- 27 On the relationship between the Theosophical Society and the contemporary feminist movement, see Dixon, *Divine Feminine*.

- 28 On the major feminine figures of the Golden Dawn, see Greer, *Women of the Golden Dawn*.
- 29 Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras*, 504-506. The main site for the expression of these ideas was, of course, Monte Verità, located near Ascona, in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. On this, see Green, *Mountain of Truth*; Barone, Riedl, and Tischel (eds.), *Eranos*, and *Monte Verità*.
- 30 For the early impact of Nietzsche's ideas in England, which originally found a welcoming audience almost exclusively in progressive (often esoterically-oriented) circles, see Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England*.
- 31 The clearest example of this attitude in occultism is certainly Aleister Crowley. About this aspect, see my "L'anticristianesimo in Aleister Crowley."
- 32 See Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 92-113.
- 33 On the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, see Godwin, Chanel, and Deveney, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor*. On the O.T.O., see Pasi, "Ordo Templi Orientis." More generally, on the development of sexual magic in the context of 19th- and 20th-century esotericism, see Urban, *Magia Sexualis* (which also includes an important discussion of the wider cultural significance of this phenomenon); and Hanegraaff and Kripal (eds.), *Hidden Intercourse* (especially the contributions by Gutierrez, Versluis, Deveney, Pasi, Urban, Hakl, and Kripal).
- 34 Pasi, "Aleister Crowley"; and Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 109-139.
- 35 See Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*; Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism*; Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud*; and Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*.
- 36 See Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 148-185.
- 37 The two "classics" on the subject (despite the very significant differences in their respective approaches) are, of course, Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*; and Said, *Orientalism*.
- 38 Apart from the already-noted Said, see also King, *Orientalism and Religion*, which presents some valid criticisms of some of the problematic aspects of Said's book.
- 39 See Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 333-362.
- 40 See Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 307-332; and Bevir, "The West Turns Eastward."
- 41 See MacLeod, *Religion and Society in England*, 169-220; and Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, 73-100.
- 42 Ensor, *England*, 140-143.
- 43 Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 345.

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Mathematical Esotericism: Some Perspectives on Renaissance Arithmology*

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Since Augustine and the high Middle Ages until it began its decline at the end of the 13th century, the symbolism of numbers was known in Europe by terms such as “arithmetics,” the “mystery (or sacrament) of numbers,” or sometimes even the “mystical sense of number.”¹ It was rediscovered during the Renaissance, and now came to be known as “mystical,” “formal” or “Pythagorean” arithmetics, or as the “mystical application of numbers.”² As such, it was part of the revival of neoplatonizing tendencies and of the interest – albeit frequently biased, in this respect – in the works of Nicholas Cusanus (1401-1464).³

Although Marsilio Ficino, the central representative of Renaissance Platonism, devoted some important discussions to an analogical or qualitative interpretation of numbers or of certain geometrical figures (both in his own works and in his translations of and commentaries on Plato⁴), the triumphant return of number symbolism to the center of humanist preoccupations was primarily the work of his young fellow countryman Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) and of the German Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522). From 1486 on, with his famous *Oratio on the Dignity of Man*,⁵ Pico made an explicit attempt to establish arithmology as a “way of philosophizing” (*institutio philosophandi*, that is to say, as a method of doing philosophy by means of numbers), and even as a wholly independent current of speculation almost on the same level of importance as Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, magic, or kabbalah.⁶ In such a context, “Pythagoreanism” ceased to be understood – as it had mostly been thus far – as a vaguely allegorical approach to mathematics, or a hermeneutical tool for interpreting the numbers in the Bible. Pico made a point of emphasizing that even if he was presenting this “philosophy by numbers” as something new, it was in reality an ancient tradition that had been highly respected by the “ancient theologians” and from there all the way up to Plato and Aristotle themselves. As is well known, he was planning a public debate presided over by the Pope himself, which should take place in Rome after Epiphany in 1487, in which he wanted to discuss no less than 900 theses written by him for the occasion. The project never materialized, and some of Pico’s theses were actually condemned by the Pope instead.⁷ In the context of this debate, Pico had been planning to make good use of the “art of numbers” in order to resolve a whole series of questions in the domains of physics and metaphysics, parallel to his (no less megalomaniac) project of synthesizing the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle.⁸ Such ambitions were in perfect accord with a certain type of Renaissance humanism for which

theology and ontology were the foundations of science and basic to its various disciplines, including cosmology and “natural philosophy.”

Reuchlin for his part, at the beginning of his *De arte cabalistica* (*On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 1517),⁹ called for a restoration of Pythagoreanism, not only because it was closely identified in his mind with his true subject, the Jewish kabbalah, but also because of the important role that numerical speculation played in both.¹⁰ While many of his contemporaries were convinced that the Greek philosophers had actually been disciples of the biblical patriarchs,¹¹ he reckoned that Pythagoras had actually borrowed his teachings from the Jewish kabbalists.¹² In the second book of *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, which focuses more specifically on the Greek dimension of his topic, Reuchlin discussed various aspects of the “Quaternary,” linked to the cube and the pyramid, drawing parallels between the sacred Tetragrammaton (the unspeakable name of God) and the Pythagorean *tetractys*. The latter he identified with pure intelligible number and the divine intellect: the supreme source and origin of the Decad in which all things are contained.¹³

To Pico’s and Reuchlin’s humanist readers, such speculation could only give new credit to the idea of a straight relation – even a close interaction – between the symbolism of numbers, natural philosophy, theology, magic, and kabbalah.¹⁴ Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, this nevertheless contributed to the perception of arithmology as a separate and autonomous current within the domain of what is nowadays referred to as Western esotericism.

The foundations

Fundamental to the perspective of Pico (and Reuchlin, although the expression as such is not found with him) was, first of all, the category – which by the time of the Renaissance already had a long history – of “formal number” (*numerus formalis*).¹⁵ It seems to have been first developed in the 13th century by anonymous commentators on Aristotle who were critical of his finitism and were attempting to demonstrate the actual – and not just potential – infinity of the series of positive integers.¹⁶ The development of the category hangs together with a new understanding of the ontological status of number, in the sense that, according to these commentators (and contrary to Aristotle’s opinion), it could be divorced from its structural connection to the “continuum,” and to the latter’s divisibility.¹⁷ Thus the “formal number” makes its appearance: number considered as wholly independent from any condition or restraint that would result from it being connected to the continuum, or to any other substratum to which it is supposedly inherent, such as collections of beings or things.

This new independence of number brought new problems in its wake. In particular, did its “formal” nature imply that it had its own proper mode of existence, or in other words, did it enjoy real ontological autonomy? In an Aristotelian context, this question seemed to lead to logical contradictions and was difficult to resolve, but it received an affirmative answer within the Neoplatonic tradition to which Pico and Reuchlin naturally adhered. According to the for-

mer, number does indeed possess independent ontological status, along with its own proper mode of existence: one that is intrinsically superior to that of sensible nature and, in fact, dominates it.¹⁸ In line with classical Neoplatonic perspectives, the “formal number” here constitutes a kind of pure intensity of being and life: by means of its ontological participation in the intelligible realities and the One, it is distinct from matter and above any properly dimensional or physical extension. On this “formal,” intermediary level, it functions, first and foremost, as a secondary cause and as an ontological, vital and cognitive force that is rooted in Being, and animates and organizes the material world.¹⁹ Although we do not know precisely from where Pico borrowed the expression, we might add that he was probably linking it in his mind to the “formal being,” or intermediary mode of created existence, discussed by him in the first chapter of his *Commento* (1486).²⁰

According to Reuchlin, in even stricter Neopythagorean fashion, the essence of intelligible number is akin to that of the divine *mens* (intellect). It “flows”, therefore, from the primordial source or Unity, which produces all things from its union with the Binary, respectively symbolized by Jupiter and Juno. From there appears the *tetractys* or quaternary, equated with the pyramidal shape, which will eventually give birth to the Denary, and is associated by Reuchlin with the creation of the *mundus medius*, or intermediary world which precedes the material one and acts towards it like the figure inscribed on a seal in relation to wax. Naturally, the One and the Duality also symbolize “form” and “matter,” a view which may, of course, have helped at some point in giving birth to the notion of “formal number,” even though, as we have seen, the expression is not used by Reuchlin himself.

Another fundamental aspect is the “inspired” or “revealed” status of number that resulted from its presence in Scripture. This notion had been a classic one ever since the Church Fathers, Augustine in particular,²¹ and is particularly prominent in Reuchlin, who likewise emphasizes the numerical value of the Hebrew letters.²² From such a perspective, number is both a theme for meditation and a privileged tool for scriptural hermeneutics. It is supposed to be invested with an inherent surplus of meaning that goes far beyond the quantitative level, for it is by means of intelligible number that the divine wisdom is “measured” out to, and manifested in, creation. For this reason, it sanctions the intertwining of the ontological order with that of the intelligible, typical of Neoplatonic perspectives.

There are essentially two reasons why number, in this context, may be called “symbolic.” The first has to do with its analogical value, that is to say, with the fact that it is believed to stand in a relation of correspondence with the objects or elements belonging to various orders of reality, according to the three great dimensions which structure ancient arithmology: cosmology, ethics, and the divine world (in other words: nature, man, and the gods). Such a categorization, although essentially of Greek origin, could be applied without too many problems to the text of the Bible. However, even though these three dimensions would remain essential to the structure of Christian arithmology, the fact that

speculation about numbers had been limited to the first 10 numbers (the fundamental Decad) in the original Hellenistic context made it difficult to apply them to the biblical text, which required that much higher numbers be taken into account as well (as can be seen already in the case of Philo of Alexandria).

Although it was their qualitative properties that made numbers into more than simple arithmetic quantities, they could not be entirely divorced from their properly mathematical characteristics; and the latter, precisely, were what made it possible to establish numerical correspondences in the three aforementioned domains. But how, precisely, were the mathematical and the analogical levels supposed to be related, and how could such a relation be justified philosophically and conceptually? Unfortunately, the rather disorderly and uncritical accounts in the few Hellenistic sources left to us²³ leave those questions unanswered.

A second way in which numbers could assume symbolical meaning was based not upon analogical associations (for example, between the septenary and the seven planets), but upon conflating the very structure of certain numerical or geometrical entities, or the operations and transformations to which they could give rise, and the intrinsic nature of the order of reality under scrutiny. In this case, we are dealing with a mathematization of reality as such, or of the dialectics of its cognitive apprehension. This is the case, for example, with the “transsumptive” method of Nicolas Cusanus,²⁴ who systematically transposes the properties of finite figures to the level of infinite ones, along with the modifications inherent in such a procedure, and next makes a second transposition to the level of the supreme infinite, simple and ineffable in itself, in which the very distinction between the maximum and the minimum collapses according to his famous *coincidentia oppositorum*. In the final analysis, such a *propaedeutics* derives from Boethius’ *De trinitate*, whose *translatio in divinis* illustrates the passage, initially from physical reality to abstract forms, and then to the one Form of absolute simplicity that is God.

Even the divine reality itself sometimes could not avoid being subjected to the application of such a method, since already Thierry of Chartres in the 12th century translated the eternal generation (*sub specie aeternitatis*) of the second Person of the Trinity by the elementary operation $1 \times 1 = 1$: he was thus symbolizing the perfect equality and *connaturality* of the Son and the Father within the divine nature by the structure and the result of the operation of multiplication applied to the unity, even if the mathematical unity is evidently different from the divine unity, to which it is related by analogy.²⁵

Analogy is therefore not absent even from this second modality of symbolism; but here it exists rather in the form of transpositions of properties that belong intrinsically to the mathematical order, to different levels of reality. This confirms once more that even in this second perspective, there remains a straight connection between the quantitative and the analogical characteristics of numbers, but understood in a way that is necessarily different from the case of straightforward qualitative associations of the kind mentioned above *a propos*, for instance, the Septenary.

Currents and Genres of Arithmological Literature in the Renaissance

The philosophers

Except for Pico and Reuchlin's discussions of arithmology, which often remain rather general, the first printed publications devoted to this newly rediscovered discipline came from the circle of erudites and religious reformers around Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (?1460-1536).²⁶ It was, therefore, in France that, in the second decade of the 16th century, number symbolism began to take shape as a new, specialized literary genre.

By 1510-1511, Charles de Bovelles (1479-1567)²⁷ published in Paris his *Liber de XII numeris*, in which he developed a complete scalar ontology based upon the first 12 numbers. References to the biblical texts were rare, except in the final chapter about the Duodenary, but even so, one sees that the work immediately goes beyond the classic series of the first ten numbers. De Bovelles discusses a wide range of analogies and properties of numbers, as well as some corresponding geometrical figures, placed along a scale of increasing abstraction. In so doing, he demonstrates how arithmetic can be made to lend support to a process of intellectual ascesis, by which the soul is progressively detached from the sensible and is elevated towards the contemplation of metaphysical unity (privileged, here, by the author over the trinitarian aspect of the Godhead). He even presents the reader with synthetic tables of numerical correspondences, prefiguring (although in an entirely different spirit) the ones in Book Two of Cornelius Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia* (1533).

Josse Clichtove (?1472-1543),²⁸ for his part, took an entirely different approach in his *Opusculum de mystica significatione numerorum* (1513), published, like De Bovelles' treatise, by H. Estienne in Paris. This seems to be the first printed text devoted exclusively to number symbolism (the one by De Bovelles had been part of a larger collection of his mathematical works). Clichtove concentrates exclusively on the numbers found in Scripture, and interprets them wholly in line with the Church Fathers and Catholic theologians. Similar to De Bovelles, but contrary to Pico and Reuchlin, speculations by which arithmology might be connected to magic or kabbalah are entirely absent with him. It should be noted that whereas Lefèvre had almost certainly developed interests in such a direction when he met Ficino and Pico in Italy in 1491-1492 (that is prior to writing his *De magia*), in 1513 those had already been discarded for some time,²⁹ in favor of theological, exegetical and reformatory preoccupations of a very different kind. Similarly, if Clichtove's booklet is inspired by a wish to practice biblical hermeneutics by means of numbers, it does so in a context of strict Catholic orthodoxy.

Finally, ten years after De Bovelles' *Liber de XII numeris*, in 1521, G. Roussel (?-1550) republished Boethius' *De institutione arithmetica*, which had been published already in 1496 by Lefèvre (with whom he and Clichtove were collaborating at the time in editing mathematical treatises). Roussel and Lefèvre both

participated, in Meaux between 1521-1525, in the circle around the reformatory Bishop G. Briçonnet (1470-1534), whom Clichtove had tutored in his youth. But the latter broke with Lefèvre as a result of an anti-evangelical and anti-Lutheran campaign under the leadership of the Sorbonne, which had the effect of breaking up the milieu in question (the second so-called “circle of Meaux”). Upon his return from Spain in 1526, King François I, who protected Lefèvre, put a provisional end to the campaign. Lefèvre died in 1536 while living at the court of François’ sister Marguerite, who had become queen of Navarra and, between 1521 and 1524, maintained a long and famous spiritual correspondence with Briçonnet.

To the purely philosophical and scientific contents of Boethius’ text, Roussel added mathematical-arithmological commentaries, many of them quite lengthy, which employed all kinds of cosmological, theological, biblical and musical analogies, grounded in an excellent familiarity with the relevant ancient and medieval sources, up to and including Cusa. He also added numerous tables and figures, reflecting his evident pedagogical intentions both in the domain of erudition and of spiritual education. The domain of geometry is not overlooked in this work either: like that of numbers, and similar to what we find in Clichtove and De Bovelles (and indeed, in Boethius himself), it is discussed not only because of the interest it has in and for itself, but is also presented as a basis for spiritual elevation towards the contemplation of intelligibles and the divine sphere. Although Roussel does not say so explicitly, his work is perhaps the clearest example of an attempt to fill the speculative gap (to which we referred above) between the arithmetical characteristics of numbers and their analogical properties.

Thus, at the beginning of the 16th century, these three publications by De Bovelles, Clichtove and Roussel to some extent re-established three specific “genres” in printed arithmological literature: (1) that of serial examination of the principal numbers and their symbolical associations, (2) that of studying the significance of the numbers in Scripture, and (3) that of learned and spiritual commentaries on an ancient philosophical/scientific treatise.

The Summae

Another specialized “genre,” which emerged in the following period, is of an encyclopedic nature: that of “arithmological *summae*,” often strongly influenced by the perspectives of the Counter-Reformation. Recombining to some extent the approaches of De Bovelles and Clichtove, and with a new kind of spiritual focus, they sought to present synthetic treatments of numerical symbolism. Their pedagogical agenda, which sought to put all the resources of learning to the service of theology and spiritual formation, is evident. One of their main goals is that of establishing a consensus between Scripture, arithmological tradition, and Roman Catholic orthodoxy. Major examples of this genre are the *Sylva allegoriarum totius Sanctae Scripturae* by Jerome Lauret (?-1571), particularly its *Appendix in sylvam de allegoriis numerorum*,³⁰ the *Mysticae numerorum significationis liber* by Pietro

Bongo (? – 1601),³¹ the *Denarius Pythagoricus* by Johann Meursius Sr. (1579-1639), and the *Arithmologia* by the famous Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680).

As the title of his work indicates, Lauret's focus is mostly on biblical exegesis, and his considerable learning in ancient, patristic, medieval and contemporary sources includes even the writings of the Christian kabbalist Francesco Giorgio (or Zorzi; ?1466-1540). Bongo, for his part, presents a veritable encyclopedic dictionary of biblical and other numbers, and their symbolical meanings. With abundant and wide-ranging quotations, showing an impressive level of learning, he draws upon authorities from all periods of history to establish the rule of number in the various domains of human activity, including the spiritual one. This omnipresence of number serves to demonstrate, according to him, the fact of a universal divine harmony, that reflects the providential design of creation. His work became a classic and an indispensable reference work in its domain, thereby definitively conferring legitimate status on it and establishing number symbolism as a learned discipline in its own right. As for Meursius, he most of all provided his readership with an erudite compilation of sources, from antiquity in particular, concerning the Decad. Kircher, true to his reputation, published what is in fact the second encyclopedia of arithmology³² even though that topic is not really treated in and for itself until the sixth and final section of the book. Kircher sees it as more or less equivalent to the general domain of magical-astronomical and divinatory speculation to which the first five sections are devoted; he mostly indulges his general fascination with themes of this kind, and seeks to integrate them as much as possible into the body of contemporary scientific knowledge, that is to say, a "natural philosophy" governed by Counter-Reformation theology.

Art and craft

Reflections touching upon the metaphysics of number could also be found in treatises of a primarily mathematical and scientific kind. Examples are the *De divina proportione* (1509) by frater L. Pacioli (?1445-1514) and, much later, the *Mathematicall Praeface* added by John Dee (1527-1608) to the first English translation of Euclid's *Elements* (1570). Pacioli, a teacher of mathematics and Latin translator of Euclid,³³ and a friend of Alberti, Dürer and Piero della Francesca, devoted the more theoretical part of his treatise to the question of the "geometrical mean," a mathematical ratio better known today as the "Golden Section" (the so-called "divine proportion"), and its role in the building-up of the sensible world. Basing himself upon Euclid's propositions concerning this particular geometrical proportion, and upon Plato (*Timaeus*) and Vitruvius, the Italian monk tried to show how the geometrical characteristics linked to the five Platonic polyhedra and their construction, along with certain symbolic properties of the "divine proportion" itself, correspond with five divine attributes,³⁴ and express its perfection throughout the fabric of the universe and in certain architectural practices.

As for John Dee's text,³⁵ it has been considerably influential in its attempt to establish a theoretical synthesis between scientific vulgarization and mathe-

mathematical esotericism, the latter being considered as the summit of human knowledge. According to him, arithmetic and geometry are the structural foundation of creation, and therefore preside over the “mechanical arts,” whose function and results he values highly. In this regard, Dee inherits from Cusanus (and shares with De Bovelles, Pacioli, and later Desargues) a didactic interest in the practical and experimental application of the mathematical disciplines. Hence he also praises the inventive skills and products of the “technicians” and craftsmen (among whom he counts himself). Nevertheless, for him, the “formal number” also has to do with a superior arithmetic and geometry. This one stands above any concrete application, and for Dee, full mastery of it amounts to a kind of magic that works by way of canalizing the efficacious virtues emanating from the divine Monad, the ontological origin of all mathematical entities and which, therefore, determines all their effects.

One of a kind

Finally, there is one more genre of arithmological writings: that of texts devoted to the symbolism of a single number. We know such discussions existed already in antiquity, although no examples of it have survived. In such writings (whose level of speculation varies strongly) one is always dealing with a number that belongs to the Decad, and the number seven is, in this respect, the most popular by far. The first two examples of such literature in the 16th century were written by Alessandro Farra (?- after 1577) and Fabio Paolini. In his *Settenario dell'humana riduzione* (1571), the former discusses the well-known topic of the seven degrees of the spiritual life. The *riduzione* in the title actually refers to the acquisition of wisdom, at the end of seven phases represented by mythological figures from Mercury to Orpheus. The discussion of the seventh and final phase contains speculations on numbers and geometrical figures. Typical for the perspective of works of this kind, the author wishes to show that the number seven synthesizes in itself all the other numbers of the Decad, along with their principal arithmetical and analogical properties. Drawing upon several bodies of traditional learning, Farra seeks to illustrate their relevance to the various stages of the spiritual life, within the general context of the septenary.

F. Paolini (1535-1605), in his *Hebdomades, sive septem de septenario libri* (1589), brings together researches typical of the learned “Academies” that existed in northern Italy in this period, such as – for example – the Venetian academy of the *Uranici*, of which he was a prominent member.³⁶ The work consists of 49 (7x7!) chapters focused on the interpretation of a famous verse by Vergil³⁷ on Orpheus and the seven notes of the musical scale (the principal themes of the book); but in fact, the main point of the *Hebdomades* consists in an attempt to explain the “miraculous” effects of Orpheus’ song and poetry in terms of natural and celestial magic. According to Paolini, it should be possible to revive those effects by incorporating into human activities the “seeds” (*semina*) that are contained in the world soul. To this end, he provides a sevenfold categorization of both the astral world and the modalities of rhetoric: by correlating them in the

correct manner, one should be able to effect a magical “animation” of music and poetic discourse. Similarly, an application of Pythagorean theories to the metrics and prosody of Latin and Italian, in the interest of literature and declamation (but this time without any preoccupation with magic) would later be presented by the Milanese author Teodato Osio.³⁸

Some other works devoted to the symbolism of a single number were published in the 16th and 17th centuries, by “George l’Apostre,” Leonhart Wurffbain, Paul M. Sagittarius and Johann van der Waeyen, including (as an exception, for otherwise they are all about the number seven) a *De Ternario* by Erik O. Tormius. In these cases we are dealing with erudite and often somewhat disorderly compilations, or school exercises, rather than with true efforts at speculative thought.

A curious (but rare) variation within this genre consists of works that investigate the appearance of the number seven in the historical dates of a given country, reign or royal house, or in the names of their successive rulers. By so doing, they try to demonstrate how that number exerts a hidden influence over the human life cycle and over how the world is organized. While focused upon a limited topic, such a perspective reflects the general idea that all the components of the Decad are contained in each specific number, which, thereby, becomes a kind of sum of the universe as a whole and reveals the secret connections between the things and beings that are in it. The idea was to survive into the 19th century, where it degenerated into arithmetical parlor games, sometimes reflecting a providentialist ideology.³⁹

Finis gloriae numeri

It is well known that from the 16th century on, discussions of numerical symbolism are found frequently in treatises devoted to alchemy or Christian kabbalah,⁴⁰ but here, of course, we are no longer dealing with works on arithmology proper. The variety of works constituting this literature, the existence of a veritable *corpus* of specialized documents, with its own celebrities and classics (De Bovelles, Pacioli, Dee, Bongo, Meursius, Kircher) along with less well-known but sometimes original and remarkable authors, is sufficient demonstration that the dream of Pico della Mirandola and Reuchlin became true indeed: in the Renaissance, “Pythagoreanism” succeeded in securing a place of its own in European intellectual culture, and the symbolism of numbers became one of the specific currents belonging to the domain of Western esotericism. Not only did it interact quite easily with its other main disciplines, such as magic, kabbalah or alchemy, but it also became important as one of the foundations of esoteric cosmology and natural philosophy. Considered, first and foremost, as an agent intermediary between the formal, outer structure and the intimate being of things, numbers were basic to the representation of reality both from an ontological and an epistemological perspective.

Thus it was by means of number that “physics” could be seen as grounded in theology, as we have seen. Partaking of both the qualitative and the quantita-

tive orders of being, number could ensure a certain degree of homogeneity of knowledge and reality, as well as providing a link between abstract knowledge and practical competence, between the visible and the invisible, and between the intelligible, celestial and material worlds as distinguished by Pico, Reuchlin and their successors. Such mathematical esotericism was part and parcel of a specific way of thinking which was grounded in the ideas of the unity of creation,⁴¹ of reality as a web of correspondences and analogies,⁴² and of various concepts of causality in which numerical entities (contrary to Aristotle's perspective⁴³) could play the role of formal causes. The progressive decline of such a worldview from the 17th century inevitably entailed the increasing marginalization, in European culture, of the currents of thought which depended on it, including certain esoteric currents such as arithmology. Increasingly, number is reduced to the status of a mere logical operator, making it possible to give precise descriptions of physical reality and to effectively operate upon it, but without any more reference to the inner essence of things and, therefore, without functioning as a mediator between material and spiritual realities. While concentrating on the geometrical and quantitative aspects of space and its contents, mathematicians, henceforth, restricted themselves to affirming, by means of their logical procedures, the mysterious affinity between concrete reality and its intellectual grasp by the human mind.⁴⁴

Notes

- * This is a revised version of an article that has been published in Italian as "Le correnti aritmologiche del Rinascimento, ovvero come L'esoterismo entra nella matematica," in: Alessandro Grossato (ed.), *Forme e correnti dell'esoterismo occidentale*, Venice: Medusa, 2008, 93-108.
- 1 Brach, *Simbolismo dei numeri*, 65-69; and cf. Ernst, "Kontinuität und Transformation," 247-325.
- 2 "Mystica numerorum applicatio," as in Roussel's commentaries to Boethius' *Arithmetica* (1521).
- 3 Schulze, *Zahl Proportion Analogie*; Meier-Oeser, *Präsenz der Vergessenen*; Counet, *Mathématiques et dialectique*.
- 4 Allen, *Nuptial Arithmetic*; idem, "Marsilio Ficino"; Celenza, "Pythagoras in the Renaissance"; idem, "Temi neopitagorici"; Toussaint, "Mystische Geometrie."
- 5 The title was bestowed on this work only afterwards (see Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 2 and note 4).
- 6 Pico, *De hominis dignitate* [etc.] (Garin, ed.), 146-149.
- 7 Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 1-58; Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole*, 267-271.
- 8 Pico, *De hominis dignitate*, 146-147; it concerns the 74 "Questions to which he promises to respond through numbers" (Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 470-485), which are connected to the second series of Mathematical Conclusions "according to his own opinion."
- 9 Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, Dedication (Goodman [ed.], 39). On Reuch-

- lin, see also Zika, *Reuchlin und die Okkulte Tradition*; Celenza, "The Search for Ancient Wisdom."
- 10 Pico already had written that, as far as philosophy was concerned, he believed that in reading the works of the kabbalah he was finding Plato and Pythagoras (*De hominis dignitate*, 160-161).
 - 11 Roth, "Theft of Philosophy."
 - 12 That some of these were strongly influenced by Neoplatonism is, of course, another matter altogether, and a well-known historical fact; Idel, "Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism"; *La cabbalà in Italia*.
 - 13 Delatte, *Études*, 249-271.
 - 14 Pico, "Paradoxical Conclusion" 26 (Farmer, *Syncretism*, 406); "Magical Conclusions" 23 and 25 (o.c., 503); "The Magic in the Orphic Hymns" 21 (o.c., 512). The study of these interactions lies beyond the scope of the present pages.
 - 15 Trifogli, "An Aspect," 351.
 - 16 Aristotle, *Phys.* IV, 10-14.
 - 17 Ibid. III, 7, 207 b 1-15; cf. Cleary, *Aristotle and Mathematics*.
 - 18 Pico della Mirandola, "Conclusion on Mathematics according to my own opinion" nr. 5 (Farmer, *Syncretism*, 467); idem, *Apologia* in *Opera omnia*, I, f. 172: ... *mathematica formaliora sunt physicis, ita etiam actualiora et sicut in suo esse minus dependent, ita etiam in suo operari; ...inter omnia mathematica numeros, ut formaliores, ita etiam esse actualiores* ("Mathematics are more formal than physics, therefore more active and, as their being is less subordinate, so also is their operation"; "... numbers, among all things mathematical, being more formal, are therefore endowed with more activity"). "Active," here, can be correlated with "endowed with a greater degree of [ontological] reality." Pico would later change his opinion about the applicability of mathematics, in the quantitative sense, to physical realities: see Valcke, "Des *Conclusiones* aux *Disputationes*."
 - 19 On this notion of "formal number," which is taken up next by Arcangelo de Borgonovo (who seems to have devoted to it a no longer extant *Expositio numeri formalis et divini*); see *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 3, 744-746 [B. Nardi]) Alessandro Farra, Cornelius Agrippa, John Dee, and Robert Fludd, see Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 77-83, 140-150, 186-190; and Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole*, 195-205, 260-265.
 - 20 Pico, *Commento*, in: *De hominis dignitate* [etc.] (Garin, ed.), 461; Valcke, *Pic de la Mirandole*, 287-295. For, if numbers possess an *activitas naturalis*, to the point that they can actually confer a power and an action (*numerus virtutem dat et efficientiam*), it is because they intrinsically possess some kind of natural character (... *esse proprietates in numeris et virtutes aliquas naturales*; *Apologia*, f. 174, 175).
 - 21 Quacquarelli, "Le scienze e la numerologia"; Horn, "Augustins Philosophie der Zahlen"; Barbone, "El número en Agustin."
 - 22 The concept of an intrinsic connection between numbers and letters is basic to the Jewish kabbalah, but older than it, and can also be found in other cultural contexts.

- 23 Nicomachus of Gerasa, *Theology of Arithmetic* (surviving fragments in Photius, *Bibliothèque* [cod. 187], 40-48); Anatolius, *On the Decad*; Iamblichus, *Theology of Arithmetic*.
- 24 Cusanus, *De docta ignorantia* I, 12 (Hoffman and Klibansky ed., 24-25).
- 25 Thierry of Chartres, *Tractatus*, par. 36-47, pp. 570-75.
- 26 See Harmsen, *Drink from this Fountain*; and cf. Janssen, "Lefèvre." Lefèvre himself discussed the subject in Book Two of his *De magia naturali* (ca. 1493), which remained in manuscript but a critical edition of which is currently being prepared by J.-M. Mandosio.
- 27 See Victor, *Charles de Bovelles*.
- 28 See Massaut, *Jossé Clichtove*.
- 29 Although independently of such pursuits, he did write in defence of Reuchlin in that very same year.
- 30 pp. 1069-1096.
- 31 See also the expanded edition, published two years before the author's death as *Numerorum Mysteria*.
- 32 Bartola, "Il matematico e gli astri" (not consulted); T. Leinkauf, *Mundus combinatus*, 192-235.
- 33 Masotti Biggiogero, "Lucia Pacioli"; Speziali, "Luca Pacioli"; Pérez-Gomez, "Glass Architecture."
- 34 That is to say: unicity, trinity, transcendence, immutability, and creative wisdom. The number five is also connected with the pentagonal planes of the dodecahedron, which symbolizes the "All" in the *Timaeus*.
- 35 See Calder, *John Dee*, I, VI, 529-617; Mandosio, "Magie et mathématiques."
- 36 Croce, "*Libri sui misteri dei numeri*."
- 37 *Aen.* VI, 646: *Obliquitur numeris septem dicrimina vocum*.
- 38 Brach, *Simbolismo dei numeri*, 96-98.
- 39 Brach, "Histoire et 'secrets prophétiques'."
- 40 Brach, *Simbolismo dei numeri*, 102-107.
- 41 Mahoney, "Metaphysical Foundations."
- 42 Brach and Hanegraaff, "Correspondences."
- 43 *Met. N*, I, 1088a.
- 44 Knecht, *La logique chez Leibniz*, 100-111; 142-150; Rossi, *Il tempo dei maghi*, 227-304.

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Danish Esotericism in the 20th Century: The Case of Martinus

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The study of Western esotericism has been developing rapidly in recent years, as witnessed by the establishment of several academic chairs, a major scholarly journal, and an ever-increasing stream of monographs and articles of the highest quality. Although the main currents and personalities particularly in English-, German- and French-speaking countries are charted, for example, in a standard reference work like the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, much more work needs to be done to increase our knowledge of esotericists in other parts of the world: Eastern Europe, Russia, the Balkans, the Baltic states, Scandinavia and elsewhere. In these areas, further scholarship will no doubt identify local developments of international currents, as well as individuals who may be less well known internationally but who often play a very important role in a regional or national context. For the Scandinavian context, information on these esotericists and esoteric currents will become available to an international readership in the form of a large reference volume, a work in progress under the editorship of Henrik Bogdan and myself.

Martinus Thomsen, the topic of the following pages, is one such regional Scandinavian celebrity, a man so well known in his own country that his name is a household word among “spiritual seekers,” yet so obscure outside the Nordic countries that he is not even mentioned once in the aforementioned *Dictionary*.

A First Introduction

Over a period of several decades, beginning in the 1930s, the Dane Martinus Thomsen (1890–1981), generally referred to by his first name only, produced a substantial corpus of texts outlining a complex cosmology and anthropology. This doctrinal corpus shows signs of combining a variety of elements current in the cultural repertoire of the early 20th century. Various elements of Martinus’ doctrines are reminiscent of themes from the theosophical and Christian traditions. Thus, according to Martinus, the entire cosmos is a living entity, striving to evolve towards ever-higher spiritual levels. Human beings participate in this evolutionary process, the concepts of brotherly love, karma and reincarnation being central to Martinus’ understanding of spiritual evolution. Another contemporary parallel is the then current positivistic philosophy: Martinus’ doctrines are variously described in his publications and in those of his followers as a logical description of the cosmos, a mathematical world analysis and as a spiritual science. Yet another is the non-figurative art of the period. Martinus

gave visual representation to what he understood to be the basic structure of the universe by means of a series of abstract paintings in vivid colors.

The thousands of pages of Martinus' published works have spawned a sizeable commentarial literature in Danish and, to a lesser extent, in Swedish. There are book-length exegeses of his work, volumes that expand on particular aspects of Martinus' cosmology, special-interest journals, websites and on-line discussion forums where sympathizers can interact. An institute has been formed with the purpose of disseminating his ideas in Denmark as well as in other countries, especially in the form of translations of Martinus' texts into major Western languages. Despite his national prominence, even the Scandinavian language literature consists almost exclusively of works written from an insider's perspective. The extant scholarship on Martinus and his works consists of one or two unpublished MA theses, chapters in a couple of edited volumes in Danish, together with brief mentions in a few books.¹ This essay serves as a first introduction to Martinus for those prevented by the language barrier from accessing the sources and the extant Scandinavian-language literature.²

Biography and Hagiography

The available biographical accounts are written either by Martinus himself, or by writers who have accepted the validity of his world vision.³ Like the biographies of other religious figures, they can be seen as texts that narratively construct Martinus as a charismatic, prophetic figure with access to a supra-sensible source of knowledge. The following sketch is not primarily intended as a description of "Martinus as he really was," but is a summary of the view of various insiders, with the hagiographic elements preserved intact.

Martinus Thomsen was born in the small town of Sindal in northern Jutland in 1890. His disciple Per Bruus-Jensen notes that Martinus was born at exactly midnight, and that the clock on the wall of his mother's cottage fell off the wall at the last sound of the chime – a sign that Martinus was to usher in a new era in history.

His mother was unmarried, and the identity of Martinus' father was never revealed. Due to her work burden, his mother was unable to raise Martinus, and the young boy was brought up by a foster family. Poverty was rampant in rural Denmark at the turn of the 20th century, and like most other boys from a humble background, young Martinus was forced to work from a very early age, first as a herd boy, later, at age 16, in the dairy industry. Biographies note that his formal education was utterly rudimentary, and that he was acquainted with little other literature than the Bible. Despite his lack of education and his rustic upbringing, the hagiographic accounts tell us, Martinus showed a compassionate nature that his companions found peculiar: animals were usually treated with little consideration, but Martinus felt compelled to help even the humblest creatures. He was also an unusually devout young man, who communicated with the divine in prayer several times every day.

At the age of nine, Martinus had his first paranormal experience. He saw a

woman emerge from the granite rock under a bridge, and float across the waters without even producing a ripple. Upon reaching the other side, she disappeared again. Martinus' foster mother explained that the bridge was a place where many people had committed suicide.⁴

Shortly thereafter, in 1908, the sources relate another remarkable incident that singled out Martinus. At the first dairy where Martinus was employed, a young boy was severely burned in an accident. Medical doctors had given up all hope of saving his life. Martinus sat with the boy for half an hour, after which the boy had recovered to the extent that he sat up in his bed and asked to be served something to eat.⁵

In 1913, Martinus moved to Copenhagen. In 1920, he took employment at the dairy Engheden in the Danish capital, a move that would prove crucial. A colleague at work served as the catalyst for decisive events in Martinus' life. This anonymous colleague was reading a book on meditation that he had borrowed from a musician by the name of Lars Nibelvang (1879-1948), and recommended it to Martinus. Shortly after borrowing Nibelvang's book, Martinus attempted to follow the instructions it contained on how to meditate. His very first attempts proved remarkably successful. On two successive days in March 1921, he experienced mystical states. Martinus later described his first experience in the following terms:

I looked straight into a being of fire. A Christ figure of blinding sunlight moved toward me, arms lifted as if to embrace me. I was completely paralyzed. Without making the slightest movement, I stared right into the waist area of the being, which was now right in front of me, at the level of my eyes. But the being continued moving toward me, and then proceeded to pass right into my own flesh and blood. I was gripped by a wonderful, elevated feeling. I was no longer paralyzed. The divine light that had taken up residence within me gave me the ability to look out over the world. And behold! Continents and oceans, cities and countries, mountains and valleys were bathed in the light from within me. In that white light, the Earth was transformed into the "Kingdom of God."

The divine experience passed. Once again, physical reality presented itself to me, the details of my room, and my humble station in life. But the "Kingdom of God" was still shining and glittering in my brain and in my nerves.⁶

Another mystical experience followed on the following day. Martinus felt that the very blueprint of the universe was revealed to him. Nibelvang was informed of these events, and decided to help Martinus financially so that he could retire from his employment, and spend his time recording the insights that he had received. Soon, other supporters joined the effort to secure Martinus' economic situation.

Over the next nearly 60 years, Martinus transformed his cosmological vision into a vast textual corpus. Like many other 20th-century prophetic figures,

Martinus was a prolific writer. His texts include *Livets Bog* ("The Book of Life," 7 vols., nearly 3000 pages), *Det evige verdensbillede* ("The Eternal Worldview," 4 vols., roughly 600 pages), 28 smaller books, a large number of articles, and various manuscripts that remained unpublished at the time of his death, and which to varying degrees have been made public since then.

Publication of the first works ensued thanks to Martinus' friendship with Bernhard Løw, who, at the time, was chairman of the Anthroposophical Society in Denmark. A prophecy that Løw claimed to have received from Rudolf Steiner shortly before the latter's death concerned a future world teacher who would appear in Denmark. Løw believed that Martinus was this person and helped him to get his first book published, in 1932. Once again, others joined forces to secure the necessary funds for Martinus to put out further volumes.

The fact that seven years passed from the initial visions to the first attempts to produce a book manuscript, and that it took another four years for this initial volume to be published, opens up the question of Martinus' more mundane sources of inspiration. Martinus' autobiographic material and the statements of sympathizers anchor his cosmological views squarely in the cosmic consciousness that he achieved as a result of those two crucial experiences in 1921. No importance whatsoever is accorded any theosophical, anthroposophical, philosophical or religious texts (except the Bible) that he could have read in the intervening 11 years: Martinus, it is said, never felt the need to open another book.⁷ Nibelvang, who from an outsider's view might be seen as the link between the esoteric milieu of the 1920s and Martinus, receives a somewhat ambivalent treatment in the sources. Martinus on occasion implied that Nibelvang's input was considerable: "Thanks to Lasse [i.e., Nibelvang], all my cosmic analyses became strong and unshakeable. He became the very incarnation of the spiritual questions of humanity. He knew, almost better than I myself did, what cosmic analyses or information people needed."⁸ More in tune with the concept of Martinus as the unique visionary genius is the following account.

Nibelvang was only willing to lend Martinus his book on meditation if he could meet with him in person. The hagiographic narrative notes that the two met, and that Nibelvang, who was well versed in the theosophical and occultist currents of his day, nevertheless deferred to Martinus as a man who would become his teacher. Followers of Martinus insist on the brevity of the encounter and on the independence of Martinus' later teachings from any mundane influence. His lack of religious education beyond the reading of Scripture is taken as a decisive proof of the unmediated, transcendental source of everything Martinus wrote. In Martinus' texts and in the writings of his followers, Nibelvang is cast in the role as Martinus' first disciple.⁹ The fact that Lars Nibelvang's own first book was published one year after Martinus', in 1933, even further complicates any discussion of who influenced whom.¹⁰

Besides books, Martinus and his circle of supporters have disseminated his cosmological views via many different channels. Martinus began a long career as lecturer in 1930, with a speech held at the anthroposophical society in Århus.¹¹ A journal, *Kosmos*, was launched in 1933. In 1935, a study center was

established, then called Kosmos Koloni and later renamed Martinus Center. There is also an administrative headquarter in Copenhagen, Martinus Institut. Collectively, these Martinus-related activities are referred to in Danish as *Sagen*, “the Cause.”

Toward the end of his life, Martinus had become a local celebrity. His 90th birthday was celebrated in 1980 in one of Copenhagen’s largest venues, the Falkoner Centret, with 1200 guests attending. When Martinus died in March of the following year, a memorial was held in the Tivoli Concert Hall, and some 1400 people are said to have taken part in the commemoration.

After Martinus’ death, activities at the course center and elsewhere have continued. The amount of publications, in particular, has increased substantially, with several dozen titles published in Danish and Swedish. Perhaps the most prolific author of all is Per Bruus-Jensen. In 1960, Martinus asked Bruus-Jensen to prepare a correspondence course that could explain the basics of Martinus’ cosmology. This course has, over the years, expanded to a four-volume systematic overview of the contents of Martinus’ textual corpus. Other volumes, by Bruus-Jensen as well as by other authors, have focused on specific themes within Martinus’ overall conception.¹²

Martinus and several of his followers have devoted considerable efforts to spreading Martinus’ cosmology beyond Denmark. Texts by Martinus have been translated into a vast number of languages, including English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese, and Icelandic.¹³ As a sign of the desire to make an international impact (and in tune with the considerably more optimistic prospects for the language a few decades ago), Esperanto was adopted as the “official” language of the Cause. Martinus and others in his close circle of collaborators went on extensive tours abroad. Nevertheless, as noted above, Martinus is relatively unknown in most countries. Only in Sweden is there a truly thriving network of people interested in Martinus, and an independent commentarial literature.¹⁴ One reason for this difficulty in making a lasting impression in other countries may be the lack of practical applications. An apt comparison could be the work of Rudolf Steiner. Anthroposophy has become a ubiquitous presence in the cultural landscape due to its concrete manifestations: biodynamic farming, Waldorf education and so forth. The highly intellectual and abstract approach favored by Martinus has presumably been a major obstacle to a wider impact.

Elements of Martinus’ Cosmology

Literature on Martinus’ cosmology, written by insiders, insists that we are here not dealing with a religion or with doctrines and beliefs. Rather, Martinus’ work is conceived of in quasi-positivistic fashion as a scientific, logical, and mathematically precise map of the underlying structure of the visible cosmos; Martinus calls it a “cosmic analysis.”¹⁵ A book entitled *Logik* (Logic) and a theme identified as “cosmic chemistry” may bear little resemblance to logic and chemistry as taught at secular institutions, but together they contribute to the perception

of Martinus' work as a spiritual science.¹⁶ Similar claims, made by other groups, are not uncommon, and can be understood both in terms of the strategic effects of defining oneself in specific ways, and in terms of folk or pre-theoretical understandings of what constitutes "religion."

From an analytic point of view, Martinus' legacy can nevertheless be seen as a kind of partial or truncated religion. Bruce Lincoln distinguishes four components in a religion: discourse, ritual, community and institution.¹⁷ Martinus' cosmology attracts people who are interested in aspects of his teachings, who read works by Martinus or by one of his commentators in order to integrate parts of these teachings in their own mix. A much smaller number of people would seem to base their world view exclusively, or nearly so, on Martinus' works. Seen as a religion, Martinus' cosmology does not invite people to become fully committed adherents, since there is no group to which one might belong, nor are there many ritual activities (besides reading books and attending lectures) that one can participate in. It is thus the doctrines that will be the focus of the following presentation. Due to the complexity and size of the material, only the barest outlines can be presented – as with other complex esoteric bodies of doctrine, a different selection would give a somewhat different impression of the corpus as a whole.¹⁸

Martinus' cosmology is based on the premise that the cosmos is a living entity, as is every part of the cosmos at every single hierarchical level. We are thus complex living entities in which every cell is a living organism, consisting of living molecules, which consist of living atoms, and so on, possibly ad infinitum. The fundamental organizing principle of every level of organization is thus that of a living system comprising living subsystems. The most comprehensive system of all is God, a sentient and benevolent being that encompasses us all.

Each living entity can be understood as the unity of three modes of being. It is a transcendent principle, the self (*Jeg*), which is the essence of the living being. It is also an ability to create and experience, manifested as six distinct "energies." These are identified as instinct, weight, feeling, intelligence, intuition and memory, all of which are transformations of a seventh type of energy, the Mother Energy (*Moderenergien*). Finally, it is a concrete manifestation in terms of seven distinct "bodies," which are similarly termed the instinct, weight, feeling, intelligence, intuition and memory bodies. All of these are transformations of a seventh type of body, the Eternity Body (*Evighedslegemet*).

A small number of cosmic laws govern all living entities. These laws function as fundamental spiritual principles that explain how living entities are structured and how they evolve, much as the natural laws are the principles underlying the material constitution of the universe and of the various entities within it. In order to understand these laws, verbal descriptions are best supplemented by symbolic images, geometrical schemata in bright colors. Martinus created 44 such images, each of which, according to his instructions, should be accompanied by an explanatory note.

The principle of contrast can serve as an example of one such fundamental cosmic law.¹⁹ The benevolence of God is not in any way compromised by the suf-

fering that we may witness. Martinus explains the existence of evil in terms of a simile. If a painter attempted to paint a white image on a white background, the result would be nothing, invisibility. Contrast is necessary for anything at all to be perceived. Suffering exists as a contrast to happiness, and is in fact, a necessary contrast. It is via the experience of suffering that we are able to evolve.

Martinus, like several other prophetic figures of the contemporary period, depicts human beings as involved in an ongoing evolutionary path, one that takes place over innumerable lifetimes. Reincarnation is one of the most pervasive *Leitmotifs* of Martinus' work. As in the theosophical tradition, reincarnation is a progressive force: once human, we never risk being reborn as worms or dogs. We carry the results of our past experiences with us from one life to the next, so that we can gradually ascend from a brutish life form to an increasingly humane and increasingly spiritual existence. Between each incarnation lies death, which in Martinus' perspective is a dimension of existence where our individuality remains for some time before it returns to a bodily form. Death is an analogous dimension to sleep: in both, our senses are temporarily shut off from the physical world before returning to it.

Reincarnationist evolution involves all of mankind, and is presented in terms that are reminiscent of the evolutionist theories current at the turn of the 20th century, but transformed into a religious and occultist vision. At earlier developmental stages, humans were like children, prey to brute emotions and caught up in magical thinking. They looked up to and needed strong leaders, some of whom assumed leadership thanks to their spiritual qualifications. Ancient Egyptians were subjected to the rule of the pharaoh, who was qualified for this position through a ritual of initiation that took place in the Cheops pyramid, a sacred site built by a brotherhood of initiates who came to Earth from a distant and more evolved world.²⁰ The ancient Israelites, too, were guided by a ruler, Moses, who had magical powers.²¹ Life in these ancient cultures was brutal. However, another cosmic law sees to it that at every level of evolution there will be particular beings who are at a more evolved stage, and who can guide others forward. In particular, three spiritual leaders were born in order to introduce an ethical component into their societies: Buddha, Jesus and Muhammad.²² Of these, only Jesus figures prominently in Martinus' oeuvre. Numerous passages in books such as *Logik* and *Den intellektualiserede kristendom* interpret Scriptural passages, often in highly metaphorical terms. Again, it is evolution that explains the exegetical principle employed by Martinus. When Christianity was first revealed, it was adapted to fit the largely instinctual nature of humanity at that time. Two thousand years have passed, and we are now able to assimilate a much more intellectual and scientific understanding of Christianity, a fact that necessitates a new reading of well-known biblical statements.

Collectively, we have thus evolved considerably. Any signs that the present age (i.e., Martinus' own lifetime) is not obviously better than any preceding period are interpreted as the symptoms of a temporary spiritual crisis. Negative forces such as the rise of scientific materialism and atheism are merely the last impulses from our lower natures before the stage of true humanity arises. This is

a state of being described by Martinus in distinctly utopian terms, characterized by brotherly love and happiness. Even from that stage, however, evolution will continue, and in some distant future, we will continue on to ever more elevated spiritual levels, in a process described as an ascending spiral without end.

Against this general background, the structure of the cosmos and of human beings, and the temporal evolution that we all undergo, are explained in meticulous detail. Martinus' writings provide detailed descriptions of the human senses, the will, memory, the reason for the existence of two genders, the characteristics of physical death, the mechanism of reincarnation, the nature of time and space, the place of war in human history, the function of prayer, the symbolism of the story of Adam and Eve, the true meaning of the sacraments, our relations with animals, the nature of psychic phenomena, and a host of other topics. Martinus' work is, in this sense, truly an all-encompassing cosmology. At this point, however, restrictions of space prevent me from pursuing his worldview further.

Martinus in Context

In his writings, Martinus barely provides any references to other authors or texts. The one major exception, the Bible, is understood in a highly figurative sense, with key passages reinterpreted to fit the overall tenor of Martinus' own cosmology. This makes it possible for his disciples to claim that he was a unique visionary genius, whose every statement was the result of cosmic consciousness. For the historically oriented reader, there are obvious similarities with other currents and other writers from approximately the same time, but any contextualization must largely remain conjectural.

First, one can note the obvious inscription of Martinus' work within an esotericist discourse, irrespective of the definition of this term that one might prefer. Martinus' cosmology has the traits that we find in Faivre's classic definition; translated into the terms of Martinus' worldview, there is the concept of an organic, living cosmos, the correspondences between organisms at all stages of organization within the cosmos, the visual images that function as mediating symbols enabling individuals to access higher knowledge, and the profound spiritual transformation that we will experience when we have reached a sufficient level of spiritual evolution. Those who prefer other conceptions of the esoteric will find in his works such elements as claims of possessing higher knowledge.

Secondly, within this general esoteric perspective, Martinus' cosmology resembles various fin-de-siècle versions of occultism. The pervasive notion of spiritual evolution is a mainstay of a range of religious alternatives of the period. It is, to a greater extent than in Blavatsky's or Steiner's worldviews, assimilated with biological evolution: we (i.e., our immortal souls) have been amphibians, reptiles, birds and lower mammals in distant epochs. As with other esotericists of that period, his works are infused with the rhetoric of science. Martinus' insights are often formulated in quasi-naturalistic terms. Karma, for instance, is

the principle whereby actions result in an “arc of destiny” (*skæbnebue*), in which the karmic effect of each action is an “energy” that sits in a queue waiting to return to the individual and affect his or her aura.²³

Compared to many writers that can roughly be situated within the theosophical family of worldviews, Martinus is much less interested in explaining details of history – there is an abstractness to his writings that contrasts with the baroque profusion of details in Blavatsky, Steiner or Cayce. Nevertheless, when such elements are present, the theosophical and more generally occultist influence is obvious. The mystical role of the Cheops Pyramid is not a particularly prominent theme in his writings, but hints that Martinus himself in a previous lifetime 86,000 years ago was involved in constructing this monument do qualify the recurrent claims by sympathetic commentators that Martinus’ texts are built on sheer logic.²⁴

Third, a possible influence (that, as far as I know, is not suggested in other literature on Martinus) is the work of Ernst Haeckel, whose books were widely known and discussed in the early decades of the 20th century.²⁵ Haeckel’s conviction that all hierarchical levels of the cosmos can be explained by means of the same principles, his progressive evolutionism, and his suggestion that God is the sum total of all matter and all forces, are reminiscent of similar themes in Martinus’ works. Even if accepted at face value, Martinus’ claim of never having read another book after his visions does not preclude him from having heard of Haeckel’s philosophy. The actual extent of any influence is nevertheless hardly possible to determine.

Finally, there are other elements of the cosmology that can remind readers of earlier esoteric authors. In particular, his vision of the afterlife seems distinctly Swedenborgian: in the interval between incarnations, the soul resides in one of many different spiritual dimensions, where its interests and predilections can be acted out. Artistic souls will be able to create works of art that are not impeded by the limitations of gross matter, intellectual souls will reach greater heights of insight, and so forth.²⁶ Again, the question of whether Martinus actually incorporated elements from Swedenborg, or just happened to formulate his ideas in a similar fashion, will presumably remain open forever.

Notes

- 1 Chapters: Hermansen, “Fra Teosofi til Martinus åndsvidenskab” (which is only partly concerned with Martinus); Bertelsen, “Martinus åndsvidenskab”; idem, “Martinus”. Unpublished MA thesis: Larsen, *Kristendommen ifølge Martinus*.
- 2 Inevitably, and unfortunately, the references in this article will be of limited use to those same readers, since it consists exclusively of works written in Danish.
- 3 Martinus’ autobiography is published as *Omkring min missions fødsel*. Zinglensen, *Martinus erindringer* compiles autobiographic material. Other descriptions by Martinus himself include *Den intellektualiserede kristendom*, 13-23.

Biographic accounts by others are found in many books on Martinus' cosmology. Essays devoted specifically to the topic can be found in Zinglersen, *Martinus sådan vi husker ham*. Per Bruus-Jensen has written a biography of Martinus, published as *Sol og måne*. The most extensive chronicle, unearthing every imaginable detail of his life, is the 1200-page volume *Martinus og hans livsværk – Det Tredie Testamente: en biografi* by Kurt Christiansen. Per Bruus-Jensen's lectures on Martinus also constitute an important source. Bruus-Jensen was a close disciple of Martinus' for ten years, and he adds a number of hagiographic details to the description of his teacher, which nicely complement some of the published sources. Sound files of the lectures are archived at www.claircast.dk/default.asp?side=podcastfiles/00_interview.htm, as file nos. 65-67.

- 4 Cited at: www.novalis.ch/zeitschrift/archiv/2004/04maerzapr/martinus.htm.
- 5 Rossen, *Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 21; Rossen does not provide the year of this incident, but locates it at Høgholt mejeri, where Martinus worked for three months in 1908 (see [#15](http://www.martinus.dk/content/dk/bo/begivenheder.php)).
- 6 Martinus, *Omkring min missions fødsel*, 59-60 (all quotes from Danish sources are in my translation).
- 7 Rossen, *Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 23.
- 8 Zinglersen, *Martinus' erindringer*, 70.
- 9 Martinus, writing an obituary over Nibelvang in the journal *Kosmos*, see <http://kosmos.martinus.dk/da/kosmos/1948/kos1948-01-013.html>.
- 10 Nibelvang, *Er døden en illusion?*
- 11 [#62](http://www.martinus.dk/content/dk/bo/begivenheder.php?vis=61).
- 12 Ibid. # 364.
- 13 www.martinus.dk/content/dk/bo/appendiks-a.html. The extent to which these translations reach readers is, of course, another matter.
- 14 Bertelsen, "Martinus."
- 15 Rossen, *Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 24.
- 16 Martinus, *Det Tredje Testamente*. *Logik* largely deals with biblical exegesis. Cosmic chemistry, a topic covered extensively in volumes 2 and 3 of Martinus' *Livets Bog*, and in a book by Bruus-Jensen (*Kosmisk kemi*), is, roughly speaking, a description of the ways in which the Mother Energy is transformed into the six energies of the living being.
- 17 Bruce Lincoln, "Culture," 416.
- 18 The complexity of Martinus' cosmology makes it tricky to produce any simple summary. The task is made no simpler by the fact that the same concepts are typically discussed at very many places throughout all seven volumes of Martinus' main work, *Livets Bog*, as well as in his other works. From an insider's perspective, Per Bruus-Jensen's work X – four volumes of in all 1800 pages – is an attempt to distil and systematize the essentials of Martinus' several thousand pages of writings. Other authors, such as Svend-Åge Rossen, have similarly produced summaries of the cosmology. In order to minimize the number of references, notes in this brief summary

will generally refer to the systematic works of these authors. The interested reader (with a sufficient command of Danish) can locate references to the source materials by referring to the detailed table of contents of Martinus' works at www.martinus.dk/content/dk/index/.

- 19 Bruus-Jensen, X, vol. 2, 15-25, *Rossen Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 13-14.
- 20 Zinglensen, *Martinus – som vi husker ham*, 279.
- 21 Rossen, *Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 34.
- 22 Rossen, *Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 35.
- 23 Rossen, *Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 74.
- 24 Zinglensen, *Martinus – som vi husker ham*, 279.
- 25 Thanks to Kocku von Stuckrad for originally suggesting Haeckel as a parallel and possible influence.
- 26 Rossen, *Martinus kosmiske verdensbillede*, 80-1.

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Part 3
Studying Western Esotericism
in Amsterdam

On First Looking into the Halls of Hermeticism

MARIEKE J.E. VAN DEN DOEL



I entered the peristyle of the department of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents when the columns had just been erected and the paint was still wet. A new Academy had been built, and I had it almost all to myself to wander around in, read its inscriptions, and contemplate the images on the walls. It was a fascinating period in which I had to acquire the principles of a wholly new field of study, having the honor of being the first Ph.D. student ever in the History of Hermetic Philosophy.

It seems to be any scholar's dream to chart an unexplored area. At the same time, already during my studies in Art History I had noted how many historians had paid attention to schools of thought that one could define as esoteric, from Aby Warburg's eye-opening scholarship onwards. It was as if a *Wahlverwandschaft* of sorts existed between art and esotericism. Which art historian does not want to become more knowledgeable about subjects such as multilayered emblems, alchemical symbols, Renaissance diagrams of the universe, collections of curiosities, and ancient books on magic? And this is only to mention the old masters – what is more, the origins of many abstract artworks, only seemingly rational, appear to lie in ideas that may be characterized as esoteric, such as Mondrian's theosophy.

When I began my studies in Art History, my interest was drawn to works of art that did not fully fit into the traditional currents of imagery and iconography, but appeared to conceal, when studied carefully, some unexpected or ambiguous meaning, pointing to ways of thought lying under the apparent surface. I also encountered the unmistakable influence of Neoplatonic thinking on works of art belonging to the Western canon, such as Michelangelo's drawings or Botticelli's "Primavera." On the one hand, it dawned upon me that many artists, from antiquity to the present time, had been attracted to different kinds of Hermetic thinking, to ideologies that attach great value to the creative faculty of man and to the evocative power of images. On the other hand, the philosophers who shaped these esoteric traditions made eager use of elaborate imagery in order to visualize ideas that could not easily be transmitted by means of rational argument alone. It has become very clear to me that the study of visual arts and that of esotericism are closely interrelated, and that this relation forms a very rewarding, and still mostly unexplored, field of academic study.

The department offered me the opportunity to write my Ph.D. thesis on Marsilio Ficino's philosophy and how it was used by early modern artists. I also did my part to educate the first generations of the department's students. I continue to draw from this invaluable experience when taking by the hand students from other fields, such as Cultural History, History of Art, and Cultural Studies and having them peek inside Plato's peristyle. I therefore see my dissertation – the first one defended at this department – not as a conclusion, but as the beginning of a life-long interest.

An Unlikely Love Affair: Plato, the Netherlands, and Life after Westotericism

DYLAN BURNS

It hurts you to kick against the goads.
– Acts 26:14, re: *Bacchae* 794-795



I never intended to attend the Hermetica sub-department at the University of Amsterdam. In fact, until I was bullied into applying, I didn't know what it was. I had never heard of Wouter Hanegraaff, even though he had come to my alma mater, Reed College, on a speaking tour to drum up interest in Western esotericism. "Westotericism," as we called it, was a big draw. My colleagues were psyched.

I skipped it. Wouter had come over 5000 miles to Portland, Oregon from across the pond, but I chose to go to a talk across campus given by a speaker from across the river, Lewis and Clark College. He lectured on Plato, and while the rest of my department hung on the honeyed words of a Dutchman pioneering a new approach in religious studies, I could think of nothing but the Greeks. Plato was my first love, and I had eyes (and ears) for no one else.

The Plato talk was actually not very good. Still, I had remained faithful to my broad-shouldered sweetheart, and put the evening out of my mind. Time went by, and I eventually came into a cadre of other Platonophiles, the so-called "Neoplatonists." When my senior year rolled around I had to write a thesis, and through an unlikely turn of events that I have no space to relate here, I wound up studying the ritual divinization (or "theurgy") of the 5th-century Neoplatonist, Proclus Diadochus.

After finishing my BA, I wanted to keep reading Platonists, but I had no intention of continuing in the Academy. Why would I want to get involved in departmental politics? What can you do with a master's in religious studies? Where could I study theurgy, anyways? Graduate school just didn't interest me.

In December 2002 my professors asked me to consider giving it a shot after all. I thought I had the perfect evasion: all the application deadlines had passed. "Not in Europe," they retorted. "Who in Europe cares about theurgy?" I shot back. "Wouter Hanegraaff!"

So, in August 2003, in Amsterdam I arrived. I didn't know much about esotericism or Giordano Bruno. The courses I was looking at had some Platonisms, for sure, but were mainly on topics in the Renaissance and modern periods. As a

definite “antiquity guy” by trade, I wasn’t sure what I was doing there, and especially what kind of research project I would be expected to undertake during the year.

So I went to meet Prof. Hanegraaff. I explained my thing for theurgists, and said I thought maybe it could have something to do with esotericism, but none of the models seemed to fit this ancient material. What was, I asked, esotericism in antiquity?

“I don’t know. Why don’t you go find out?” he said.

At first I thought he was joking, but I ended up spending the next year trying to come up with an answer to this question in my Master’s thesis. I was lucky that Dr. Kocku von Stuckrad had just arrived, giving me a director well-versed in all things ancient and arcane – “the true Sicilian bee.” Trying to define antique esotericism – trying to conceive and delineate an entire field in classical studies – was sort of like trying to get a drink of water from a fire hose. The sources were maddeningly diffuse. The scholarship was voluminous, opaque, and, often, just plain unreadable. I had to teach myself two dead languages. And I loved every day of it.

It wasn’t just the material that drew me so deeply into the Hermetica program and, ultimately, the field; it was the people, the environment, the *feel* of GHF. Wouter and Kocku were both as warm and available as supervisors could be. Our seminars were rigorous but also relaxed and open, without a hint of authoritarianism. Any idea could be floated, defended, or dispatched. This combination of high intellectual standards with a personal and intimate approach helped forge a relationship with my mentors at GHF that continues to thrive long after my graduation, a series of conversations that we’ve now been carrying on for half a decade.

The same can be said for the quality of interaction with other Hermetica students. Although the Master’s program was relatively small back in those antediluvian times, I still managed to make friendships with fellow students that survived my tenure in the Netherlands, and which I continue to enjoy today. In my absence, the quality of student life in the GHF seems to have grown tremendously. I know this because the strength of the intellectual and social bonds students formed there attained enough critical mass to pull *old students back in*. Almost 3 years after I finished my degree, I found newer GHF students contacting me about all things esoteric. I’m glad they did, as in them I’ve happened upon amazing people and tremendous academic interlocutors.

It never hurt that Amsterdam is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, simultaneously elegant and desperate and sleepy. Wherever I was – in the classroom, perusing the classics library, out for a drink with friends – I always considered a certain sweet fragrance, the scent of repose. Despite its frenetic activity, its crowds, this rainy city was the perfect field for meditation on and contemplation of these old, old books.

If all this sounds a bit effusive, unlikely, or strange, that’s because that’s what my experience with Amsterdam Hermetica was like. In every respect, in its past, present, and future trajectories, it was intense, and always unexpected. Call it serendipity, synchronicity, *anagkē*, or sheer gravity. GHF was an unavoidable blessing.

Heterology in Amsterdam: The Academy Takes the Other Out to Dinner

OSVALD VASIČEK



According to Michel de Certeau, one of the tasks of the historian is to exorcize society's inner demons.¹ The "other" (society's unconscious) has to be enfeebled, so that we can sleep with a clear mind, not bothered by our own shortcomings. This other is our bad guy, the cowboy with the black hat. Western society is defined by his exclusion: it is an *anthropemic* society, it vomits the other out.² Paradoxically, however, the other is fundamentally constitutive of our Western identity; we define ourselves by what we are not. So, the other is a tiny little stone in our shoe. And that is our problem: what to do with him?

At first glance, a solution would seem to be not to speak about/with him, in the hope that he will stay silent (and eventually go away?). He is like the bastard son; but of course, bastard sons have a tendency to come knocking on daddy's door one day. Sometimes, that can be painful. History and historians know everything about this. The other is out there and we have to deal with him. So historiography recently started to invite him home more often. Sometimes eagerly, sometimes less so, but ultimately, in the second half of the 20th century, the other's existence was acknowledged more consciously. Finally, in 1999, something magical happened in Amsterdam. The university was blessed by the creation of an official chair and academic center that would be concerned solely with the study of the "other tradition": "History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents" (GHF).

I started my Religious Studies program that same year. Fresh out of high school, I was quite green regarding my views on religion, history, and much else. I had always been fascinated by history, stories, myths and especially ideas, both philosophical and religious. Mystery, magic, witchcraft, strange old men studying deep into the night with their noses in ancient scrubby books, full of geometrical signs, symbols and Hebrew, amidst bubbling tubes, bulbs and glasses that emit foul vapors of rotten eggs, while the moon turns red and Saturn shows all his might – could I ever dream that one could actually study this history seriously at a university? Illusion and reality are fleeting concepts and a human subject is ontologically constituted at the intersection of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. In 1999, however, I only had to open my eyes to see a course "Hermetica I" listed in the study guide. That was the first step – the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

In 2004, I graduated in Religious Studies with a specialization in “Western Esotericism.” My primary topic of study was the Christian kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin. Two years later, in 2006, I was appointed to a Ph.D. research position at GHF. My research still focuses on the German humanist Johannes Reuchlin and his construction of a Christian kabbalah or kabbalistic Christianity. I am especially concerned with the question of identity formation through the acceptance of an “other” symbolic system and the effects this has on the development of subjective concepts of worldviews and identities.³

The discourse about the “other” is a red thread woven through the study of Western esotericism on different levels. There is differentiation on the methodological level: the historian who tries to speak for the subaltern. There is division on the level of the history under scrutiny: the relationship between the “main” tradition and its other. Finally, there is an important rift in the texts themselves: for the most part it is secretive literature – it speaks what it does not say, it shows what it does not show. In this discipline we encounter heterology upon heterology, and this is, in my opinion one of the most exciting and promising aspects of this field of study. It uncovers challenging methodological difficulties that have implications not only for the characterization of our culture but also for the very nature of the practice of scientific research itself.

Ten years of study revealed that it is not unthinkable – to use an understatement – that the other tradition will turn out to be mainstream after all. How surprising! What will the next ten years reveal? The challenges and possibilities are numerous; the field still lies open with much uncharted territory – *hic sunt leones*. What will happen with our attitude to the other? Could it be possible that our society will eventually change into an *anthropophagic* one? Perhaps the next step will be that we take the other out to dinner (first figuratively, then literally) and perhaps the history of the other will reflect the history of GHF. It started off, in 1999, as the “other chair” at the University of Amsterdam: ten years later, it is the beating heart of Religious Studies at the same university.

Notes

- 1 Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, transl. Michael B. Smith, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 227; and also idem, *The Writing of History*, transl. Tom Conley, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- 2 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, transl. J. and D. Weightman, New York: Penguin, 1992, 388. From the Greek *emein*: “to vomit,” as opposed to an *anthropophagic* society, from the Greek *fagein*: “to eat.”
- 3 Johannes Reuchlin is a Christian who uses Jewish symbols (and ideas?) in order to “better” define his own Christianity.

The Copenhagen Connection

SARA MØLDRUP THEJLS



When I applied for the one-year master in Mysticism and Western esotericism at GHF in Amsterdam, everyone around me told me it was an impossible dream. After all, in Denmark I had a son and a husband who could not just move to the Netherlands with me, so how would I manage this? My solution was easy albeit somewhat expensive: I would fly to Amsterdam once a week to follow classes, stay overnight and return to Copenhagen the day after. The decision turned out to be one of the best and most important ones I have ever

made, both on an academic and on a personal level.

Personally, I found friends and colleagues whom I still strive to see as often as possible, even though we live in different countries. On the academic level, I experienced a scholarly milieu that saw me not only as a student, but also as a young scholar, enticing me to participate in conferences and submit articles for journals and anthologies. Furthermore, the relatively small number of students created a perfect environment for fruitful and informal discussions both in and outside the classroom. A specific advantage of the Master's program was the repeated practice of giving presentations on a fixed topic in the style of a conference paper, thus providing a solid preparation for actually giving "real" papers at academic conferences.

The wide historical and theoretical scope of the different courses provided an excellent opportunity to test one's own academic interests. I had the freedom to delve into subjects as diverse as ancient gnosticism, medieval kabbalah and contemporary discordianism, and the topic of my master's thesis reflected my long-time interest in theoretical subjects, on the one hand, and kabbalah, on the other. The thesis developed into a theoretical discussion of the concepts of Western esotericism and kabbalah, combined with an analysis of the function of language in medieval kabbalistic texts.

Upon returning to the University of Copenhagen, where I followed a three-year research Master's program, this project served as the foundation for my Danish Master's thesis. The Danish thesis had to be considerably more extensive than the Amsterdam one, and thus it was a great help to be able to use the first as a basis for the second, which was an inquiry into contemporary more or less kabbalistic groups and their interpretation of the medieval kabbalistic material. It was interesting to note that even within these groups, whose rein-

terpretation of the medieval material had wrapped it in so many layers of New Age rhetoric and symbolism that it was hardly recognizable, the conception of the function of the Hebrew language as of utmost centrality was still prevalent. This obviously relates to the ambiguous role of tradition in the process of legitimization and authorization within the kabbalistic groups, and this topic is what I hope to be able to pursue in a Ph.D. research project. As for now, I am employed as an external lecturer at the Department of History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen, where I will be teaching an introductory course on Western esotericism in the autumn semester of 2009.

With respect to GHF, I firmly believe that without the academic training, the sometimes lengthy but always fruitful discussions, and the encouragement I met at the department, I would never have been able to acquire the confidence in a career in the study of religions that I possess today, even though studies in the humanities in general are presently undergoing hard times all over Europe.

If You Seek

SUSANNAH CROCKFORD



My story begins in a library. I was working on a retrospective cataloguing project and amidst the dust and bookworms of a forgotten collection of 19th-century texts, I discovered a large selection of pamphlets concerning unknown topics such as mesmerism, phrenology, and physiognomy. What were these arcane subjects? And why were so many people writing about them in the 19th century, the age of progress and reason? My curiosity led me down the rabbit hole. I emerged several months later in Amsterdam, enrolling in the MA in Mysticism and Western Esotericism. The first class set the tone: a discussion on the definition and significance of altered states of consciousness in Western religious history, enthusiastically led by Wouter Hanegraaff, and involving students from disciplines as disparate as neuropsychology, philosophy, and art history. This experience has continued throughout the different classes I have taken so far; excellently passionate teaching combined with a plurality of views from across the academic spectrum.

Despite the diversity of the program, I have maintained my focus. Through a tutorial specifically on Mesmerism and Parapsychology, my thesis on mesmerism and gender dynamics, and term papers on Franz Anton Mesmer, Eliphas Lévi, and the Theosophical Society, I have elaborated upon my initial interest in occultist and fringe-scientific trends in the 18th and 19th centuries. This research reveals that the stereotype of modernity – as rational, irreligious, progressive – was a construction of the present projected onto the past. The ideas of Darwin coexisted with those of Mesmer; the groups that pursued social justice also partook in ritual magic. The past is as contradictory and messy as the present; making sense of both leads to gnosis.

What has impressed me most about my time at GHF is the sense of being included in a professional academic community. The level of discussion in seminars is set at a serious scholarly level, and participation enables you to refine and reject arguments in order to gain an understanding of the subjects. The faculty members are amazingly supportive of one's academic career, not only through critical feedback but through organizing specialized tutorials, encouraging conference participation, and suggesting possible publications. The interaction with your peers is co-operative rather than competitive, which enables a nurturing learning environment where even socializing feels like education.

But this isn't education like sitting in school being spoon-fed prescribed answers. You are positively encouraged to devise your own research focus, and then you are able to set your term papers and seminar topics on that area. This fosters intellectual independence and self-discipline, it also grants enjoyable freedom to research what interests you at an advanced academic level. In turn, this provides a solid groundwork for future projects. I intend to continue my research on mesmerism and occultism in the 18th and 19th centuries at a Ph.D. level, and from there, continue into a career in research and teaching.

Part 4

Western Esotericism in International Perspective

From “the Hermetic Tradition” to “Western Esotericism”

ALLISON P. COUDERT

It is a privilege and an honor as well as a source of deep satisfaction to contribute to a volume commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (GHF). As one of Frances Yates' last students, I vividly remember the enormous excitement that attended the publication of *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* in 1964 and *The Art of Memory* two years later. These works were followed by what Yates' biographer Marjorie G. Jones has described as a “torrent of books,” and Yates' meteoric rise to academic fame culminated in her eventual recognition as a “Dame of the British Empire” in 1976.¹

The theory that Yates let loose on the world with the publication of her many books is that modern science originated in a new and optimistic view of human nature that first emerged in the writings of the Florentine Neoplatonists and was carried into the 17th century through the subterranean channels of occult philosophy. The very idea that man could change his environment for the better and harness the powers of nature to his own advantage had its roots in the magical world of Renaissance Hermeticists, and the twin concepts of progress and reform, which are the hallmarks of modern science, emerged from the grandiose schemes of Renaissance magi, not from the patient accumulation of scientific evidence and scientific theories. In Yates' view, the *Rosicrucian Manifestos* of the early 17th century were perfect expressions of the new and exhilarating view of human potential and prowess that made the scientific revolution possible. With their call for the “Universal and General Reformation of the whole world” and their conviction that creation can be brought back to the state in which Adam found it, *The Rosicrucian Manifestos* provided a bridge between Renaissance Hermeticism and modern science. On the basis of this evaluation of their importance, Yates suggested the word “Rosicrucian” should enter the vocabulary of serious historians to describe the kind of activist, reforming mentality that paved the way for modern science.²

Yates's reputation was at its height during the 1960s and early 70s. But it wasn't long before a backlash set in. Her work came in for considerable (and sometimes ferocious) criticism on the grounds that her use of the term “Hermeticism” was vague and unreliable, her reading of texts misleading, and her generalizations unwarranted.³ Many of these criticisms were justified. However, as the dust began to settle, it became increasingly apparent that Yates' broad insights into the role of occult philosophy in shaping aspects of modern thought have been immensely stimulating in terms of subsequent scholarship. This is espe-

cially true in the relatively new field of Western esotericism, which has built on Yates's work and refined it in important and significant ways: first, by substituting the broader but more clearly defined term "Esotericism" for "Hermeticism," and, second, by emphasizing the historical diversity of the various strands of esoteric thought and their complex relationship with science. Thus, by putting Hermeticism on the academic map, Yates provided an enormous impetus for the study of Western esotericism, now finally recognized as a legitimate field of academic research. I say "finally recognized" because for all of Yates' fame, the study of Western esotericism had to fight its way into the academy in the face of considerable hostility. In the brief reflections that follow, I want to point out some of the obstacles faced by Yates and students like me who followed in her footsteps. In essence, this essay is a tale about the pitfalls and pleasures of venturing into a new field of study; but thankfully it is a tale with the happy ending described in the pages of this celebratory volume.

To begin my story, I must admit that thinking about my days as Yates's student brought back both fond and frightening memories. Put yourself in the place of an eager American college graduate taught to regard Francis Bacon as the father of modern science only to discover upon her arrival at the Warburg Institute that not only was he a "Renaissance Magus" – what, I wondered, was that? – but also a devotee of "Hermes Trismegistus," of whom I had never heard. As you may imagine, my intellectual universe was profoundly and irreparably altered by the years I studied with Frances Yates, especially since I had arrived at the Warburg convinced that good science and enlightenment thinking only emerged with the demise of religion and the decline of magical and occult superstitions. In taking this position, I followed the lead of that eminent historian of science George Sarton, whose influential three-volume *Introduction to the History of Science* was still required reading when I was a college student. Sarton's unequivocal dismissal of "superstition and magic" revealed the "Whiggish" orientation that prevailed at the time. As he wrote,

The historian of science can not devote much attention to the study of superstition and magic, that is, of unreason, because this does not help him very much to understand human progress. Magic is essentially unprogressive and conservative; science is essentially progressive; the former goes backward; the latter forward.⁴

But while I came to the Warburg with this "Whiggish" view firmly entrenched in my mind, I left with an appreciation of the complicated role esoteric thought in all its many forms – and this includes magic – played in the development of western intellectual and cultural history. But, as I mentioned earlier, for all of Yates' fame, such an appreciation was not common either when I began my graduate studies in the 1960s nor when I finished them in the 70s. In fact, I have a rather thick file of letters rejecting my various applications for teaching positions. Working on subjects like the Christian kabbalah, magic, and witchcraft

obviously did not appear promising to academic search committees at the time. My profoundest hope is that no student currently engaged in the study of Western Esotericism will have to wait as long as I did to find gainful employment!

As I have often said to graduate students, be careful when you select your thesis adviser, for that person may end up exerting more influence on your life than your parents or future spouses ever will. This was certainly the case for me. For it was Yates who suggested that I write my dissertation on Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614-1698), the youngest son of the Flemish iatro-chemist Jan Baptista van Helmont. While a few articles had been published about the younger Van Helmont, at the time I began my investigations he was still something of an elusive figure, known for his interest in the Hebrew language and the Jewish kabbalah as well as for his reputation as a practicing alchemist and physician. Anne Becco, who published two articles linking Van Helmont to Leibniz, concluded that, for the most part, he was a “*farfelu*,” a bit of a hair-brained idiot, as we might say.⁵ This was definitely not a promising evaluation of the man who would occupy my thoughts for years to come and whose life history immersed me in the study of alchemy, the Jewish kabbalah, witchcraft, sorcery, and magic, along, of course, with more supposedly reputable subjects like philosophy and “natural philosophy,” as science was called in the 17th century. I eventually concluded that all of the varied interests – esoteric and non-esoteric – that shaped Van Helmont’s thought were integral factors in the scientific and intellectual developments of the early-modern period and could not be separated into good or bad, rational or irrational, progressive or backward-looking, as Sarton as well as many others claimed. And far from being a “*farfelu*,” I argued that Van Helmont’s thought was representative of the complex ways of thinking common among such luminaries as Robert Boyle, John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz, not to mention a host of lesser lights.⁶ Now this may seem like special pleading to justify my own research, which clearly reflected the influence of Frances Yates, but I could only reach these conclusions because of the contributions made by other scholars to the burgeoning field of esotericism. However, as I mentioned earlier, progress in this new field was not always smooth. The first pitfall I encountered was when I gave a talk at the Warburg Institute shortly after my arrival there, describing the beginning stages of my own research.

The gist of my talk was that Van Helmont’s interest in the Hebrew language, the Jewish kabbalah, and alchemy were all part of his progressive agenda for promoting both a better understanding of the natural world as well as peace and toleration among religiously fractious humans. I went on to explain how Van Helmont’s interest in the Jewish kabbalah encouraged him to reject Christian notions of innate human sinfulness and emphasize instead human potential and the ability of individuals to reform, improve, and even perfect the world. Things seemed to be going quite well until Professor Gombrich (later Sir Ernst), who was then Director of the Warburg, got up, looked me straight in the eye, and posed the following question: “Miss Coudert, what you have said is very interesting, but do you think Van Helmont was insane?” This was not a line of questioning I had expected or wanted, and I have to admit that I do not recollect

my answer. I can only say that when I was invited back to the Warburg to give a lecture some ten years later, I began by posing this question with the intent, quite frankly, of emphasizing how ludicrous it was. Professor Gombrich was in the audience and proved to be a very good sport. He was not hostile to esotericism per se, just intent on having clear and viable explanations of its importance and influence, which, given the value of hindsight, were not always provided by Frances Yates, not to mention myself.

The years after I left the Warburg and returned to the United States were somewhat lonely from a scholarly point of view because I met few people interested in the esoteric subjects that engaged my attention. While I knew that scholars like Antoine Faivre and, later, Wouter Hanegraaff were out there, they were miles away both in terms of distance and interests from my colleagues in the colleges where I taught. It wasn't until 1998 when I received an invitation to contribute to a volume of essays honoring the work of Antoine Faivre that I felt I had finally found an intellectual home. This homecoming was reinforced in 2000 when I was asked to give a paper in one of the sessions on Western Esotericism at the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in Durban, South Africa. There, for the first time, I came face-to-face with scholars of esotericism, whose work I had read and enjoyed for years. As you may well imagine, for me this was a truly memorable meeting. Much like the ugly duckling of the fairy tale, I finally found myself among my fellow esoteric swans!

It was not long after this meeting that Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff asked me if I would write a proposal to the American Academy of Religion asking that Western esotericism be officially recognized as an area of study within the Academy with the privilege of organizing sessions at the annual AAR conferences. We were granted group status and this, combined with the establishment of university departments such as the one we celebrate in this volume, not to mention the founding of the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) and the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), along with the journals *Aries* and *Esoterica*, provides ample proof that Western esotericism has come into its own.

I can only conclude by saying that the study of esoteric thought has come a long way from those days when scholars like me were relegated to the "lunatic fringe of the British Museum Reading Room" to quote John Saltmarsh and deemed to be "tinctured with the kind of lunacy ... [we] set out to describe" to cite Sir Herbert Butterfield.⁷ The study of esotericism has proven its worth not only by providing a more nuanced picture of key developments, figures, and events from the medieval to modern times, but by revealing the multi-faceted and at times contradictory roles esoteric thought played in promoting, on the one hand, progressive ideas at the core of modernity, such as progress, toleration, and democracy, as well as their conservative counterparts: nationalism, fundamentalism, and fascism. No longer marginalized, esotericism must now be viewed as an integral part of Western religious, intellectual, and cultural history. The center GHF has played a crucial part in this profoundly important transformation.

Notes

- 1 Jones, *Frances Yates and the Hermetic Tradition*, 152.
- 2 For a succinct statement of Yates' views, see Yates, "The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science." For her discussion of Rosicrucianism, see *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*.
- 3 Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform*, 576; McGuire and Westman, *Hermeticism and the Scientific Revolution*; Rossi, "Hermeticism, Rationality and the Scientific Revolution"; Hesse, "Hermeticism and Historiography: An Apology for the Internal History of Science"; Schmitt, "Towards a Reassessment of Renaissance Aristotelianism"; idem, "Reappraisals in Renaissance Science." The fiercest criticism came from Brian Vickers, "Frances Yates and the Writing of History"; idem, "Analogy and Identity." See also Copenhaver, "Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus and the Question of a Theory of Magic in the Renaissance"; idem, "Natural Magic, Hermetism, and Occultism": idem, "The occultist tradition and its critics." One of the most balanced analyses of Yates can be found in Cohen, *The Scientific Revolution*, 8, 15, 161, 169-176, 181-182, 187, 286-296.
- 4 *Introduction to the History of Science*, vol. 1, 19.
- 5 Becco, "Aux sources de la monade"; idem, "Leibniz et F. M. van Helmont."
- 6 Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*; idem, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*.
- 7 Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science*, 98.

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From Paris to Amsterdam and Beyond: Origins and Development of a Collaboration

ANTOINE FAIVRE

Sometimes events retroactively exert an influence on things that have contributed to their coming about. Thus, the center for “History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents,” the foundation of which was part of an ongoing process of institutionalization, has left its mark on its antecedents. Among these is a French institute that belongs to the proto-history and history of the center whose tenth anniversary we are celebrating.

One reason for the ideological and political tensions that France experienced since the beginning of the Third Republic was the controversy over what is known as *laïcité*. The Parliament resolved this question partially by passing a Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State in 1905. A measure that preceded this law was the establishment – realized in 1886 – of a Department of Religious Studies (“Section des Sciences Religieuses”) within the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, in addition to the already existing Departments (“Sections”) devoted to various disciplines.¹ The foundation of this Department was part of an effort at phasing out the Church’s monopoly on education concerning the “religious.” The Department was, and still is, secular (*laïque*), that is, non-confessional (non-“religionist”), just like all other organizations for education or research in the public sector.

At the time of its foundation, the Department of Religious Studies comprised hardly ten chairs, called *Directions d’Étude*. Having gradually incorporated domains such as the history of Christian mysticism and late antique gnosis, and having opened itself to ethnology and sociology as well, it has 61 chairs at present. Hence, the number of specializations concerning the various *faits religieux* (facts of religion), as we call them, have multiplied. Until 1964, such initiatives merely followed general tendencies in previous French as well as international research, and were, therefore, not really innovative. In that year, however, the department assigned to one of the *Directions d’Études*, whose chair was now vacant, a new title which no other official institution – whether in France or abroad – had ever listed in its programs: “History of Christian Esotericism.”

Although the majority of colleagues who were asked to pronounce on the title voted in its favor, this does not mean that they had engaged in an actual debate about the meaning that should be ascribed to it. “Esotericism” was adopted almost by chance, at the suggestion of one of the colleagues, Henry Corbin, because it seemed to correspond more or less to the competences of a candidate suitable for assuming this *Direction d’Études*: François Secret, a historian specialized in the 16th century who had written authoritative works on

Christian kabbalah. In this way, from the outset it was up to the future holder of the position to decide on how to define the term.

From his election in 1965 until his retirement in 1979, Secret was extremely active as a teacher and researcher. Yet, these considerable activities notwithstanding, he did not actually feel a need to define the objective of his *Direction d'Études*. In fact, as he has often admitted to me, "esotericism" embarrassed him. Nevertheless the term proved suitable as an umbrella, for Secret did not limit his research to the 16th century alone, and willingly accepted students coming from various horizons.

When the chair became vacant again in 1979, several colleagues proposed modifying its title. This was, firstly, in order to open up the notion of esotericism so that it would no longer apply to Christianity alone. Secondly, in order to limit it to the European region and the modern period (from the beginning of the Renaissance). And thirdly, so as to avoid suspicions of essentialism by changing the substantive ("esotericism") into an adjective and add the plural "currents." Moreover, in view of enlarging the range of applicants, they also proposed to add to the adjective "esoteric" another one, namely "mystical." All these modifications were adopted. When the position, now named "History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe," was declared vacant in 1979, I applied and had the honor of being elected.

During the following 12 years, I realized to what extent this new title that I had inherited still failed to designate the specific character of the field in a satisfactory manner. The programs of my seminars were certainly organized along the lines of what I understood to be "mystical and esoteric currents," but this did not always correspond to the views of other historians. Moreover, the copula "and" remained ambiguous: were the two adjectives supposed to suggest a near equivalence or a neat distinction? And finally, even if "mysticism" had, despite a certain vagueness connected to the word, achieved recognition in the academy since a long time,² this was not the case with "esotericism," a term whose meaning was even vaguer in the eyes of the general public. It was especially this third consideration that encouraged me to concentrate primarily on the component "esoteric currents" in my seminars and research programs, and it ultimately persuaded me to develop an epistemologically grounded concept of "modern Western esoteric currents." It took some time, but I finally felt ready to present a more or less acceptable version of it at the occasion of a public conference organized by the EPHE on January 29, 1991.³ Like any concept with scientific pretensions, this model did not claim any exclusive validity and was presented as subject to later revision, modification, and criticism.

In April 1992, during a conference in Lyon, I presented this model once more,⁴ and had the privilege of meeting a young researcher, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, who presented me with an article of high quality devoted to epistemological reflections concerning the notion of "gnosis." It did not take me long to recognize in him a colleague who combined a genuine interest in our common field of research with a strong interest in methodological issues and real expertise in the study of texts. This encounter would prove to be heavy with positive

consequences for the development of the field. Between 1965 and 1992, it had benefited from an increasing interest within the scientific community, because of the numerous projects (doctoral theses, Ph.D.s etc.) carried out under my *Direction d'Études*. But all the same, no other chair had yet been created anywhere else. This was mostly due to a lack of studies dealing with the specialism in and for itself, and a lack of generalists in this field who could contribute to a greater recognition of its specificity. Certainly, in 1992 a *Histoire de l'Ésotérisme et des Sciences Occultes* was published by my student Jean-Paul Corsetti,⁵ and in 1993 Jean-Pierre Laurant (*Chargé de Conférences libres* at the EPHE) brought out his *L'Ésotérisme*.⁶ However, we were still waiting for a specialist who would give the field a new and decisive impulse. Now, very fortunately, in the wake of his article on gnosis Hanegraaff continued to devote a considerable amount of his own publications to questions of methodology.

In August 1994, he and Roelof van den Broek then organized a seminar on *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* at the Amsterdam Summer University,⁷ in which I also participated; in 1995 he published a truly “seminal” article, “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism”;⁸ in August of the same year, in the framework of the 17th conference of the IAHR (International Association for the History of Religions) in Mexico City, we together directed a symposium *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions*,⁹ during which he gave presentations, again on methodology, that aroused numerous responses; and in 1996 he published his Ph.D. thesis (defended only briefly before at the University of Utrecht), *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*.¹⁰ Having received a postdoctoral fellowship, he settled in Paris for a year, in 1997-1998, which provided him with an occasion to tighten academic bonds with the EPHE, to the mutual profit of both parties. He notably participated in the symposium *Symboles et mythes dans les mouvements initiatiques et ésotériques*, which was held at the Sorbonne in June 1999, under the aegis of the EPHE.¹¹ Moreover, in 1999, he also became co-director (together with Roland Edighoffer and myself) of the journal *ARIES*, which in 2001 became *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (Brill Academic Publishers) and is still being co-directed by us today, now in collaboration with Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke.

Hanegraaff's initiatives and publications – notably, the aforementioned thesis – marked a decisive turning point. Indeed, their importance has played a major role in the establishment, in 1999, of the new chair dedicated to our subject in Amsterdam – 34 years after the creation of the first one at the EPHE.¹² This chair was not only new, but also of a wider institutional range than mine, as it was flanked by two assistant professorships, a secretary and two Ph.D. researchers, and the center was able to offer a complete academic course program, all together comprising the center for “History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents.” Appointed on September 1, 1999, Hanegraaff was put in charge of the center and on January 18, 2000, he held his inaugural lecture.¹³

Among the first notable examples of the ties that unite the Amsterdam center and our *Direction d'Études* were, on the one hand, the session “Western esotericism and Jewish mysticism” that we organized together within the framework

of the 18th international conference of the IAHR in Durban (August 5-12, 2000) and, on the other, the symposium "Around Frances Yates," held at the Sorbonne in 2001. But above all, in 2000, the center appointed as one of its assistant professors Jean-Pierre Brach, who after having studied at our *Direction d'Études* had been appointed *Chargé de Conférences libres*. In 2002, when I became professor emeritus, Brach applied for my succession and was elected. The Section for Religious Studies used this opportunity to fulfill my wish of having the chair's title changed: it became "History of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe" (i.e. the adjective "mystical" was removed). Finally, to fill the vacancy of the other assistant professorship, in 2004 the center appointed Marco Pasi, who had also been a student and subsequently a *Chargé de Conférences libres* at our *Direction d'Études*, and had earned his Ph.D. under my direction.

Ever since, our two institutions have not ceased to intensify their collaboration. They have found themselves to be associated even more closely in the context of several international institutional frameworks that they have helped establish. The ESSWE (European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism) was founded in 2005. Its website serves as a platform of communication between scholars, and it has now organized two international conferences (Tübingen 2007; Strasbourg 2009). There is also the annual "program unit" (more precisely, "Group") "Western Esotericism" within the AAR (American Academy of Religion), which was launched in 2004 and in which researchers from many countries participate.

This is not the place to list the increasing number of further institutions associated with these various initiatives. One, however, cannot be passed over in silence here. In the United Kingdom in 2006, the University of Exeter grasped the fortunate opportunity of founding a third academic chair in our field. It is held by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, and forms the basis of the "Exeter Center for the Study of Esotericism" (EXESESO), which offers its students a complete academic trajectory. The close collaboration established between Exeter, Amsterdam and Paris, and of these three with other institutions, is part of a development with considerable impact on scholarship internationally. At the heart of it, the center for "History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents" has already played, and will continue to play, a substantial role.

Notes

- 1 The EPHE was founded in 1868 and is, together with the Collège de France, one of the so-called "*Grands Établissements*." Essentially devoted to research, they are organizationally distinct from both the "*Grandes Écoles*" (specialized in the preparation for competitive entry examinations) and the actual universities (which, together, form the three principal types of institutions for higher education in France).
- 2 Cf. especially Poulat, *L'Université devant la mystique*.
- 3 Faivre, "Comment écrire l'histoire des courants ésotériques occidentaux?" (1992), 5-21, and idem (1999), 4-24. For the same year, cf. Faivre, "Introduction"; idem, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, XI-XXII.

- 4 Faivre, "Une Discipline universitaire nouvelle: L'ésotérisme," 35-43.
- 5 Corsetti, *Histoire*. Faivre and Needleman, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* likewise appeared in 1992.
- 6 Laurant, *L'ésotérisme*.
- 7 Van den Broek and Hanegraaff, *Gnosis and Hermeticism*.
- 8 Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method."
- 9 See Faivre and Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*.
- 10 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*.
- 11 *Symboles et mythes*.
- 12 While the committee was hesitant to use the term "esotericism" or "esoteric" and chose "Hermetic philosophy and related currents" instead, the two terms refer quite precisely to the same field of study.
- 13 Hanegraaff, *Het einde van de hermetische traditie*.

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Western Esotericism in the United Kingdom

NICHOLAS GOODRICK-CLARKE

As the holder of the Chair of Western Esotericism at the University of Exeter it gives me pleasure to acknowledge the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (GHF) and its associated Chair, occupied by my colleague and friend Professor Dr. Wouter Hanegraaff at the University of Amsterdam.

The Chair at Amsterdam has been a decisive factor in the recent development of academic studies in Western esotericism in Britain. However, their beginnings lie further back in the late 1950s and may be traced through to the 1970s. In the first place, the work of scholars at the Warburg Institute, University of London, was pivotal in shaping the scholarly study of magic, astrology and kabbalah in the Renaissance. Such works as D.P. Walker's *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (1958) and Dame Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979) were landmarks in the scholarly exploration of the history of esotericism. True to the original vision of its founder, Aby Warburg (1866-1929), the Institute's library provided a taxonomic resource for research in Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, alchemy, magic, and related subjects. My own interests in this field began when I was a postgraduate student at Oxford in the 1970s. That decade saw a major wave of research and publications on the modern occult revival, the Golden Dawn, and Theosophy, by such authors as Ellic Howe, Robert Gilbert, Leslie Price, James Webb, Christopher McIntosh and myself. As a German historian, I had a special interest in late-19th-century intellectual currents, and it was my encounter with Ellic Howe and fellow scholars in the modern occult revival in 1976 that advanced my studies and forged my links with the Warburg. My Oxford doctorate on the political uses of occultism in the service of modern nationalist and racialist ideology, was later published as *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (1985) and translated into many languages. My publisher at Aquarian, Michael Cox, had early intimations of the commercial growth of this subject and invited me to edit a series of anthologies on major figures in the history of occultism, including my own on Paracelsus, supplemented originally by volumes on John Dee, Robert Fludd, Jacob Boehme, Emanuel Swedenborg, Rudolf Steiner, and Paul Brunton. This series is now published by North Atlantic Books as the *Western Esoteric Masters* and includes further volumes on Marsilio Ficino, Helena Blavatsky and G.R.S. Mead.

My own interests in the 1970s were clustering around the history of "occultism" in the German tradition of *Geistesgeschichte* (history of thought). At the

same time, my approach was inspired by the history of religion and millenarian movements, and I had sought out Professor Norman Cohn (1915-2007), author of the path-breaking *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), as my doctoral supervisor. Methodologies deriving from the sociology of religion involving sects and new religious movements (NRMs) were also relevant. However, aside from the Warburg's unchallenged eminence in Renaissance studies, there was neither a disciplinary focus nor a firm academic identity for studies in the history of occultism. James Webb's concept of "rejected knowledge" implied a sociology of marginality, confining occultism to a form of epistemological disqualification in a post-Enlightenment perspective. In the early 1990s, Antoine Faivre led the re-visioning of magic, alchemy, astrology, theosophy and occultism as the heirs of Hermetism, Neoplatonism and kabbalah from the Renaissance into modernity. Thanks to Faivre's scholastic typology of these currents, Western esotericism was increasingly viewed as an integral continuous stream of heterodoxy in the Western intellectual, religious and artistic traditions. Faivre's impulse was germane to the academic identity and consolidation of studies in Western esotericism, initially at the Sorbonne, then in Amsterdam, and now in Britain.

My first opportunity to introduce Western esotericism in a formal curriculum arose from lectures I gave on John Dee, Paracelsus and Agrippa. In winter 2000, Clare Goodrick-Clarke and I then presented a six-week series of seminars on the *Corpus Hermeticum* at Oxford. In 2002, I was invited to launch an MA teaching module in "The Western Esoteric Tradition" at the University of Wales, Lampeter. Three years later, the University of Exeter made a major commitment to the field by creating a Chair in Western Esotericism to which I was appointed in August 2005. This initiative and the opportunity to direct a new Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism (EXESES0) coincided with the formation of a new School of Humanities and Social Sciences combining the departments of History (with interests in religion, culture, science and medicine), Sociology and Philosophy, Theology, Classics and Ancient History, and the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. In this institutional context, Western esotericism was offered unique resources for multidisciplinary collaboration in seminars, research and publications. The taught MA in Western esotericism at Exeter provides a classic grounding in the major historical topics of Western esotericism: (1) The Western Esoteric Traditions: Historical Survey and Research Methods; (2) Alexandrian Hermetism, Neoplatonism, and Astrology; (3) The Hermetic Art of Alchemy; (4) Renaissance Kabbalah and Its Influence; (5) Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry; (6) Theosophy and the Globalization of Esotericism; (7) Esoteric Traditions in English Literature and Society, 1550-1670; (8) The Esoteric Body.

A highlight of the Master's programme is the option of attendance at the three study intensives at EXESES0 Study Conferences held on the pleasant Exeter campus each term. These Study Conferences involve a busy schedule of lectures, seminars, library tours, film presentation, and tutorials.

Members of EXESES0 faculty brought wide academic experience to their teaching. My own interests include Paracelsus, John Dee, Rosicrucianism, Emanuel

Swedenborg, 18th-century illuminists, modern Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Dr. Angela Voss, Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Kent, Canterbury, has interests in Renaissance music, magic and astrology; the function of the symbolic imagination in spiritual perception; musical performance practice and the visual arts as vehicles for spiritual knowledge. Her publications address the astrological music therapy of Marsilio Ficino and the nature of symbolism. Clare Goodrick-Clarke's main specialization is the history, symbolism and practice of alchemy, especially in Paracelsian medical alchemy, having studied practical alchemy and *spagyrics* with Professor Manfred M. Junius (1929-2004), a leading authority on Indian and Western alchemo-medical practices. Her publications include G.R.S. Mead and *the Gnostic Quest* (2005), *The Alchemical Physician* (Healing Arts 2009), and a history of Western alchemy (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Dr. Peter Forshaw is a former British Academy research fellow who teaches courses on "Renaissance Philosophies" and "Magic, Science, and Religion" at Birkbeck College, University of London. His research interests include the typology of alchemical and magical practice, Paracelsian philosophy, and the interweaving of Hermetic, Neoplatonic and kabbalistic strands in the works of influential figures like Ficino, Pico, Reuchlin, Agrippa and Dee. He has recently published a major study of Heinrich Khunrath. Dr. Christopher McIntosh's research interests and numerous publications include Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, the modern occult revival in France, the history of magic, esoteric currents in Central and Eastern Europe, esoteric fiction, and the interface between spirituality and nature. Tobias Churton has made several television programs including the award-winning Gnostic series accompanied by the book *The Gnostics* (1987). He has since published further books on mysticism, Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, including a biography of Elias Ashmole. Paul Bembridge, Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) since 1996, has wide experience in teaching English literature at university level. His work on Rosicrucian elements in the poetry of Andrew Marvell is one aspect of his course on "Esotericism in English Literature" and he also teaches the history of astrology.

From its inauguration in October 2005, the MA program in Western esotericism at Exeter has grown steadily. EXESES0 currently has over thirty students in the two-year MA program and a further eight in the doctoral (Ph.D.) program. Student MA dissertations are written on such diverse topics as the septenary principle in Western cosmology; Martinus the Danish theosophist; theosophical influences in modern art; a comparison of post-mortem teachings in Theosophy and orthodox Christianity; the influence of the ancient Greek rites in modern ceremonial magic; the esoteric sources of Rembrandt's *Faust in his study*; theories of Universal Harmony in twelfth-century Gothic architecture; the impact of Jan Baptista Van Helmont's Theory of Love, Desire and Universal Sympathy on his "Christian Philosophy"; and the Grail Legend in Modern Esotericism 1900-1945.

The first EXESES0 Ph.D. was awarded in October 2008 to John Selby for his thesis "Dion Fortune and her Inner Plane Contacts: Intermediaries in the Western Esoteric Tradition." Seven further students are presently in the doctoral program of EXESES0, chiefly engaged under the Chair's supervision on topics re-

lated to Theosophy and the modern occult revival. Subjects include ritualism in Anglican orders, magical societies and neo-Theosophy; the continuity of Iranian dualism in the cosmologies of Theosophy and Anthroposophy; reincarnation in Theosophy; esotericism and quantum theories of Consciousness, 1960-2010; the educational curriculum of Western esoteric societies; and the construction of Helena Blavatsky's Theosophy in its philosophical and historical context.

EXESES0 is not alone in its advancement of studies bearing on Western esotericism in Britain. The Warburg Institute remains a world-leading center for Renaissance studies. Other related academic initiatives include the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture at University of Wales, Lampeter. Directed by Dr. Nick Campion, the Centre investigates the relationship between astrological, astronomical and cosmological beliefs and theories, and society, politics, religion and the arts. The Centre for Research into Freemasonry was established by the University of Sheffield in the academic session 2000-2001, first under the directorship of Professor Andrew Prescott, and now, since 2007, under Dr. Andreas Önnersfors, to promote scholarly research into the historical, social and cultural impact of freemasonry, particularly in Britain.

Just as GHF acted as an early point of crystallization for Western esotericism among scholars working in the history of religion and cultural history, so it is evident that the processes of scholarly exchange, conferences and the migration of students and faculty continue to develop a powerful network of scholarly centers dedicated to the advance of these studies in the British Isles. The academic study of esotericism at Exeter is due in large part to the setting up of the Chair in Amsterdam, which provided an important stimulus for the development of the subject. The remarkable achievements of the Chair and Center in Amsterdam in establishing teaching and research in this new and growing field are many and varied. At an early stage the Center introduced an MA pathway in Mysticism and Western Esotericism, offering courses in Jewish and Christian kabbalah, Renaissance esotericism, Christian mystical traditions, religious pluralism in Europe, and modern occultism with reference to the visual arts. The publications by the Center's staff have also played a vanguard role in establishing the domain of Western esotericism. Their numerous monographs, journal articles, and the re-launch of *Aries* as the flagship journal for studies in Western esotericism all represent a significant volume of academic activity triggered by its new institutional setting. Especially important was the major undertaking of the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Brill 2005), edited by Wouter Hanegraaff with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach, a four-year task resulting in a 1200 page encyclopedia with more than 400 articles on figures, movements, and ideas in the history of esotericism. This publication offers a dedicated reference work for students and advanced scholars investigating topics in Western esotericism and is unlikely to be superseded for another generation. Another key contribution of the Center has been Dr. Hanegraaff's recruitment of talented scholars over the past decade. Several of these have since left to take prestigious Chairs abroad, notably Prof. Dr. Jean-Pierre Brach (now Chair in the History of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe

at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sorbonne), Prof. Dr. Olav Hammer (now Chair of History of Religions at the University of Southern Denmark) and Prof. Dr. Kocku von Stuckrad (now Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Groningen). Their work at the Center and their passage to other leading appointments demonstrate the seminal influence that Amsterdam has upon the propagation of studies in Western esotericism and its further development.

From Talk about Esotericism to Esotericism Research: Remarks on the Prehistory and Development of a Research Group

MONIKA NEUGEBAUER-WÖLK

It all began when I joined the University of Halle in the autumn of 1993. I was appointed there as a historian responsible for the early modern period, but more important for the story that will follow was my collaboration with the recently re-organized Interdisciplinary Center for Enlightenment Research. This may seem surprising at first sight, for if one searches for “Hermes in the Academy,” one will probably not do so at a research institute focused on the Enlightenment. Nevertheless that was my point of departure. Who “Hermes” was, I did not even know at the time.

Instead, the focus of my interest was on the Freemasons. I had come across them during my studies on late-Enlightenment society, and began to consider the Masonic movement of the 18th century as my topic for research at the Center. Much about it still seemed unexplored, and thus the field looked promising. At the same time, however, I perceived a serious danger of getting lost in a multitude of historical details and that with a movement which seemed to have a rather marginal place in scholarly and historical research. Although I was certainly very interested in questions of historical detail, I experienced the need for a larger perspective that would lend broader relevance to such research.

In this search, it did not take me long to come across the concept of esotericism. “Esoteric” is an adjective that traditionally spooks through the literature on Freemasonry and Secret Societies, and I vaguely suspected that here I might find the larger perspective for which I was looking. But what was esotericism? I found some first intimations in a *Lexikon esoterischen Wissens*¹ that I had bought in the bookstore of a station while waiting for my next train. Early in 1994, when the Lessing Academy in Wolfenbüttel invited me for a lecture, I decided to speak about “Esoteric Orders and Bourgeois Society: Developments toward Modernity in the 18th-Century Milieus of Secret Societies.”

The lecture was expanded into a small volume that appeared in 1995 in a series called “*Kleine Schriften zur Aufklärung*.” In the meantime I had, of course, gone beyond the lexicon mentioned above, and had been reading everything available that seemed somehow connected to the theme. The result was a text which, in exemplary fashion, committed the “primal sin” in writings on this topic: its references failed to distinguish between the works of dilettantes and scholars of esotericism, and, worst of all, the approach was wholly unhistorical.

The esotericism of the Freemasons became linked to each and every thing that I had encountered during my readings: from the mysteries of antiquity to the ancient gnostics, Egypt, Hermes and Zarathustra, the heretical movements of the Middle Ages, the Rosicrucians, and so on and so forth.² In the absence of any methodological control, my text suggested that there existed some trans-historical Tradition – a notion which I would later learn to identify as one of the core concepts of esoteric thinking itself.

My beginnings in this field were therefore far from ideal, but what proved important was the connection to Wolfenbüttel. In November 1994, I had been elected to represent the Halle Center for Enlightenment Research on the board of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für die Erforschung des 18. Jahrhunderts* (German Society for the Study of the 18th Century), which had its seat at the Herzog August Library.³ Here I met Friedrich Niewöhner and learned about his collaboration with Carlos Gilly, the librarian of the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* in Amsterdam. In 1994-1995, the Wolfenbüttel Library and the BPH together organized a conference on Rosicrucianism in the 17th century⁴ with an exhibition of Rosicrucian manuscripts and printed books.⁵ As a result, I soon became aware of the importance of Dutch research in this domain.⁶

At the same time, it became clear that my new connection with Wolfenbüttel offered special opportunities. At the end of the 20th century, the Herzog August Library was probably the only place in Germany where one could mention “esotericism” as a research theme without endangering one’s scholarly reputation. The speechlessness of German academics with respect to this theme did not concern contemporary esotericism such as New Age, which was certainly discussed and investigated, mostly by confessional theologians and sociologists. However, any historical reflection – any attempt to connect contemporary esoteric currents with earlier developments in cultural history – stood under an unspoken and hence unreflective verdict. Other than in countries like France or England, in Germany the connection of National Socialism with certain aspects of esoteric thinking had resulted in a sharp and definitive caesura after the end of the Third Reich. Furthermore, applying esotericism as a concept to the periods both before and after 1945 was even more problematic because it suggested an overarching approach to certain specific domains of research which had succeeded in establishing themselves as separate and autonomous research traditions. Examples include the history of alchemy or of the so-called mysticism of modernity, but particularly the study of specific authors and their influence, from Paracelsus to Böhme, Andreae or Comenius, up to the Romantics. Labeling all this as “esoteric” could feel like a provocation to scholars working in these domains. The Herzog August Library, however, was so much above any suspicion of promoting unserious or unscholarly agendas, that it was possible here to make a first attempt.

That my attempt was successful, I owe to the open-mindedness and willingness to experiment of my colleagues on the board of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für die Erforschung des 18. Jahrhunderts*. They agreed to my proposal of devoting the society’s annual conference of 1997, at the Herzog August Library, to the theme

“Aufklärung und Esoterik” (Enlightenment and Esotericism). Twenty scholars coming from eight disciplines agreed to contribute, including Carlos Gilly and Friedrich Niewöhner. In between the planning of this conference and the publication of the proceedings came my discovery of the brand-new historical/scholarly study of esotericism that had started to establish itself internationally with the publication of Antoine Faivre’s *L’ésotérisme* in 1992⁷ and the continuation of his approach in Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s dissertation of 1996. Although Hanegraaff’s topic was *New Age Religion*, so that he could have restricted himself to the contemporary scene, he actually traced its origins back to the earlier traditions of esotericism in Western, European-occidental culture.⁸ From Faivre and Hanegraaff I learned to understand the Renaissance of the 15th century as the founding period of esoteric thought, and to differentiate between ancient models and their modern reception. Hence the Introduction to the volume of proceedings, *Aufklärung und Esoterik* (published in 1999) already distanced itself clearly from the approach taken in my *Esoterischen Bünde*:⁹ Freemasonry had become only one among several central topics which had begun to interest me in 18th-century esotericism,¹⁰ and methodically/conceptually there was clear progress as well.

In the same year I met Hanegraaff in person, during a conference *Hermetismus in der frühen Neuzeit* organized by Hartmut Lehmann and Anne-Charlott Trepp at the Max Planck Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen.¹¹ Indeed, if one wished to avoid provoking scholars by using the term “esotericism,” one could use “Hermeticism” as an overarching model for the same field. As is well known, Frances A. Yates had been the pioneer of such an approach, and this alternative had been generally preferred by Anglo-American research; but after the turn of the millennium, Göttingen did not continue this line of research.

Hence it was not Göttingen, but Halle that became the center of interdisciplinary esotericism research in Germany. Against the background of the Wolfenbüttel Conference, it now proved possible here to get colleagues interested in taking the next step, and to apply for funding for a new research group focused on “Enlightenment in the Context of Modern Esotericism” within Halle’s Interdisciplinary Center for Enlightenment Research. In the Preface of the Pre-Application to the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) (March 2002) the objective is formulated as follows:

This application proposes a new interpretation of central concepts of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, by confronting them with a spiritual/religious tradition that hails back to the early modern period. In current research, this tradition is increasingly referred to by the concept of esotericism. Although this proposal refers to influences originating in the Renaissance, the research projects themselves are nevertheless situated within the study of the Enlightenment, and this is where they find their scholarly context and goal. That goal is to perceive the developmental process of the 18th century from a larger perspective that comprises the modern period as a whole, up to the present. The 18th century is therefore analyzed as a period whose transformative character can be understood in a new way thanks to this larger context.

The emphasis was on understanding esoteric thought in the 18th century as free religiosity and as a specific conception of knowledge. This first proposal could take into account¹² that in the meantime, after the Paris chair held by Antoine Faivre, a complete institute for the historical study of esotericism had come into existence. It was not by chance that this innovation had occurred in the Netherlands, where the study of religion had been established already in the late 19th century, with the first academic chairs for that field in Europe.¹³ It fitted this liberal tradition that in September 1999, a center for the study of Western esotericism (“History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents”) had been founded at the University of Amsterdam, with Wouter Hanegraaff appointed as its director.¹⁴ This new development increased our chances of success with the DFG because it lent plausibility to our research topic and its eventual international acceptance. The final application was submitted to the DFG in July 2003, and in the spring of 2004, we could begin our work in Halle.

The new research group discussed the current state of methodology in the international study of esotericism, and decided to focus its own perspectives and approaches on the question of period transitions. The period of the Enlightenment was situated between early and late modernity: as a caesura, as a bridge, or as an expression of a specific discursive connection between these two historical formations. This generalizing concern was given concrete shape in five thematic fields: esotericism in Wolffianism (Jürgen Stolzenberg, Karin Hartbecke, Hanns-Peter Neumann), Emanuel Swedenborg (Michael Bergunder, Friedemann Stengel), Johann Georg Hamann (Manfred Beetz, Andre Rudolph), and the development of Halle as a location of interdependence between Enlightenment and esotericism in the period around 1700 (Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Markus Meumann) and the period between 1740 and 1800 (Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth).¹⁵ After a successful application for continuation at the end of 2006, a sixth theme was added: a project on hieroglyphics and language of nature (Werner Nell, Annette Graczyk). The first research cycle was concluded with a second conference on Enlightenment and esotericism. Its proceedings have appeared at the end of 2008; with 17 contributions, this volume documents the development of research during the decade that has elapsed since the Wolfenbüttel Symposium.¹⁶

Wouter Hanegraaff was invited to Halle as a guest during the first research cycle, in July 2005. In one of our group sessions, he discussed his concept that what connects esoteric currents through the centuries is the fact that they have come to be categorized as “rejected knowledge” by outsiders. The great strength of this approach is that it does not define esotericism in terms of its contents, and thereby avoids the problems inherent in any “positive” profile of what is or is not “esoteric.” Instead, esoteric thought is constructed “negatively” or indirectly, on the basis of how it is perceived by outsiders, as the object of a polemical discourse, which demarcates it as ridiculous or false.¹⁷ For us, of course, there was particular interest in his observations about the 18th century, “The Construction of the Occult: The Enlightenment against the Irrational.”¹⁸ Here the Enlightenment perspective on *das Andere der Vernunft* was understood in a

new manner against the background of strategies of exclusion developed during the preceding centuries. We discussed the question of how, and in how far, the understanding of modern esotericism as “rejected knowledge” has originated in older polemics. In any case, it is now broadly agreed that the study of esotericism is no longer trying to find the only true and correct approach to its topic of research, but rather, consists in an international and interdisciplinary discussion about the relative advantages or disadvantages of the various possible approaches.

This is also true of the study of religion in general. Early March 2008, Kocku von Stuckrad was our guest in Halle, and we discussed esotericism within the context of “European History of Religion.” I had already been interested for some time in this new approach to *Religionswissenschaft*, which might be helpful as a general framework for the historical projects to which our research group devotes itself. It is no coincidence that these two new research perspectives – study of esotericism and European History of Religion – have developed almost in parallel. Faivre and Hanegraaff stand for the constitution of the study of esotericism, and Gladigow, Cancik and Kippenberg for the European History of Religion, which – in a form compatible with the study of esotericism – is primarily a German phenomenon.¹⁹ Von Stuckrad is the only one connected to both innovational processes.²⁰ Tübingen, Bremen, Erfurt, Paris and Amsterdam: this was, and remains, the field of reference for this area of European scholarship. In this space, the understanding has emerged that the religious history of Europe has a pluralistic structure, and that even in Western culture, religion is by no means identical with Christianity. Since there is a journal like *Aries*, a reference work like the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, and a professional organization like the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), this development has become irreversible. This is what institutional formations can and should accomplish: the development of a scholarly infrastructure as the foundation for an autonomous process of research.

In this context, Halle represents the establishment of this field in the context of a temporary research group: nowadays, as is well known, an important factor – next to traditional individual research and institutions for the long term – in giving visibility to new themes. We are now entering the final phase of our collaboration, which will be concluded with a third and final conference on “Enlightenment and Esotericism” in the spring of 2010. While the earlier conferences had a strong focus on early modernity, the emphasis will now be on continuations towards the contemporary world. Here too, colleagues from Amsterdam will be among the participants. Thus, we will conclude a cycle of collaboration that will certainly be continued in other contexts, with new personal constellations and new thematic perspectives. Our common interest in this field of research will certainly lead to many more anniversaries.

Notes

- 1 Drury, *Lexikon esoterischen Wissens*.

- 2 See, e.g., Neugebauer-Wölk, *Esoterische Bünde*, 12-15.
- 3 Neugebauer-Wölk et al., *25 Jahre DGEJ*, 101.
- 4 See *Rosenkreuz als europäisches Phänomen*.
- 5 Gilly, *Cimelia Rhodostaurotica*.
- 6 As seen already in the footnotes to my *Esoterische Bünde*, 73.
- 7 Faivre, *L'ésotérisme*.
- 8 See especially Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 365-410.
- 9 Neugebauer-Wölk, *Aufklärung und Esoterik*, 1-37.
- 10 Cf., still parallel to the preparations for the Wolfenbüttel Conference, my essay "Die Geheimnisse der Maurer."
- 11 Trepp (ed.), *Antike Weisheit*.
- 12 Ibid., 6.
- 13 Cf. Kippenberg and von Stuckrad, *Einführung*, 17.
- 14 See interview with Hanegraaff, especially 20.
- 15 Cf. Neugebauer-Wölk et al, "DFG-Forschergruppe."
- 16 Neugebauer-Wölk, *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Rezeption, Integration, Konfrontation*.
- 17 Hanegraaff, "Forbidden Knowledge."
- 18 Ibid., 244-247.
- 19 See the foundational text by Gladigow, "Europäische Religionsgeschichte," and Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, vol. I, esp. 13-31.
- 20 Cf. the passages about both research concepts in Kippenberg and von Stuckrad, *Einführung*, esp. 73-77 and 126-146.

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Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism: Upon the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Amsterdam Chair

ANDREAS B. KILCHER

The wholly new dynamics that has emerged in research of European esotericism over the past decade – new methodological approaches, new questions, new research institutions, a new agility and visibility of academic concern with esotericism generally – all of this has happened largely because of the Amsterdam Chair for “History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents.” During the short period of its existence it became one of the first and most important addresses of the European study of esotericism. No one who nowadays investigates modern European esotericism, no one who wishes to actively participate in this academic discourse, will be able to ignore GHF. It has become a capital on the European map of esotericism research.

Conclusions

1. Esotericism cannot be objectively defined, but is the fluid product of discourses and interpretations.
2. Esotericism can be understood as an epistemological phenomenon, and can therefore be described from the perspectives of history, sociology and theory of science.
3. Esotericism is guided by a supreme optimism and universalism concerning knowledge.
4. Esoteric knowledge does not stand in an oppositional but in a dialectical relation to exoteric (ecclesiastical, academic, normative, etc.) knowledge.
5. The greatest tension in the dialectics of esoteric epistemology is the one between knowledge and belief.
6. The greatest irritation of esotericism consists in the transgression of the boundaries of rational and empirical knowledge towards myth and literature.
7. Esotericism is an integral part of the European history of knowledge.

Ad. 1. From esotericism as substance to esotericism as construct: The achievement of recent esotericism research is demonstrated in symptomatic fashion by the new way of answering the very question of the concept of esotericism. In recent years, a kind of Copernican turn has occurred: from a substantive concept of esotericism, i.e. an object that can be defined by objective criteria, to esotericism as a concept of discursive negotiation.

- 1.1. Classic historical ways of presentation, leading to important master narratives with titles such as “Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism” or “History of Esoteric Currents,” serve to confirm esotericism – precisely in its historical differentiation – as an autonomous and largely closed chapter within the history of religion. Systematic researches of specific esoteric concepts of nature, man, soul, history, language, and so on, are likewise built upon definable specifics of esotericism.
- 1.2. Opposed to this is the understanding that esotericism cannot be defined in general by objective criteria, but rather, *in itself* encompasses a range of phenomena that are highly disparate both historically and systematically (from mythical concepts of nature to magical and medical practices and all the way to artistic concepts of language); that furthermore, “esotericism” as a *concept* was subjected to highly disparate and controversial interpretations (as antediluvian arcane knowledge of sacred scriptures, as knowledge of the hidden qualities of nature, as a religion of reason against exoteric semiotic systems, as popular knowledge against academic knowledge, or polemically as “superstition”).
- 1.3. Hence esotericism turns out to be the product of various interpretations within the greatest variety of historical, social, cultural and intellectual contexts.
- 1.4. This de-substantialization and discursivation has consequences for scholarly research of esotericism. Understanding esotericism requires a shift of attention from contents to functions, from substance to construct, from history to discourse.
- 1.5. The primary competence of the sciences of religion becomes as questionable as their reduction to a religious phenomenon. The classical approaches of the science of religion are, as a result, expanded with those of philosophy, historiography, ethnology, cultural studies, literary studies and the history of science.

Ad 2. From a singular phenomenon to a process of epistemological cultures:

This paradigm shift towards de-substantialization emphatically raises the question of how, then, this Protean figure, that makes its elusive and ever-changing appearance in various discourses of European modernity and that we call “esotericism,” is to be properly understood and described. The answer: not theoretically as a static and singular phenomenon, but practically, as a dynamic and collective construction and interpretation. In other words: as the product of specific cultures of knowledge.

- 2.1. The polymorphous construction of esotericism may be adequately grasped by means of a *praxiological* concept of knowledge, which understands knowledge as performance, as culture. Knowledge then refers to the complex of the collective work of interpretation, by means of which sciences are constituted as well as esotericism.
- 2.2. “Esotericism” is part of various cultures of knowledge, resp. the product of various epistemological practices.

- 2.3. The object of investigation is not a singular religious phenomenon, but the epistemological, social and cultural negotiations of “esotericism,” or more precisely: the sociologies, politics, techniques, cultures, and poetics of knowledge by means of which epistemological formations such as magic, kabbalah, occultism etc. are founded, transmitted, transformed, defended, or degraded.

Ad 3. Optimism and Universalism of Knowledge: The assumption that esotericism does not exist except by being created in a discursive epistemological process becomes more plausible given its self-proclaimed epistemological qualities.

- 3.1. The high knowledge-claim of esotericism becomes visible *ex negativo* by a comparison with mystical theology. Mysticism is carried by an elementary *sceptis* in regard to knowledge about the world, man, and nature. In categorical opposition against knowledge, it posits a non-knowing (cf. *The Cloud of Unknowing*). While mysticism sacrifices any positive (“external”) knowledge in favor of the interiority of faith, up to the silence of negation, esotericism presents itself with a supreme optimism and universalism of knowledge, no less selfconsciously than the modern sciences.
- 3.2. This optimism and universalism of knowledge is manifested in many ways: for example, in the claim of “secret” (arcane) knowledge, of “higher” (sublime) knowledge, of “primordial” knowledge, of encyclopedic (universal) knowledge, of absolute (total) knowledge, and so on.
- 3.3. One example of the optimism of knowledge is gnosis. In texts like the *Gospel of Truth*, the gnostic is presented as one who knows, who is familiar with the secret map of the world. Here gnosis assumes that there has been a primordial unity of knowledge, which has fallen into oblivion due to a catastrophe, and should be recovered. Hence, the therapeutics of gnosis is called “salvation through knowledge.”
- 3.4. An example of the universalism of esoteric knowledge is the kabbalah. As *Chochma* (science) – respectively the latin *ars cabbalistica* (Reuchlin) or *scientia cabbalistica* (Pico della Mirandola) – the kabbalah likewise claims a secret knowledge about the metaphysical plan of the world, etc. It turns wholly into a hermeneutical and semiotic process of knowledge-generation (*ars, scientia*). Hence logicians from Lull to Leibniz expect that kabbalah will give them the method for attaining universal knowledge (*scientia universalis*) by way of a rational logic of the combination of signs (*characteristica universalis*).
- 3.4. This optimism is taken to an extreme in the knowledge of the *ars notoria*, which seeks to attain the absolute and, on a foundation of kabbalah and Lullism promises the whole of worldly knowledge (*artes et scientiae*) in a short period of time.

Ad 4. Dialectics of esoteric and non-esoteric knowledge: The esoteric concepts of a “higher,” “primordial,” “hidden,” “absolute,” etc. knowledge stand in

various kinds of relation to whatever may be considered “official,” “recognized,” “normative” (ecclesiastical as well as secular, academic) knowledge. This relation is not antithetical but dialectical: a mutual relation of constitution, facilitation, demarcation, rejection.

- 4.1. Such dialectics are suggested already by the fact that esoteric disciplines do not present themselves in isolation but within complementary constellations (i.e., in the relations physics/magic; chemistry/alchemy; astronomy/astrology; school medicine/esoteric medicine; psychology/parapsychology etc.).
- 4.2. Within this dialectical context, the esoteric knowledge claim questions officially recognized theological and scientific models of explanation. Formulated positively: whatever is considered to be normative and recognized scientific knowledge is taken by esotericism far beyond the boundaries of what can be rationally or empirically validated, i.e. into the realms of religion, myth, narration (literature).
- 4.3. Conversely: from the perspective of recognized scientific knowledge, the emphatic claims of esotericism as a “higher,” “hidden,” “absolute,” etc. knowledge are the very essence of false knowledge, “pseudo-knowledge” or “para-knowledge.”
- 4.4. The very fact of a mutual irritation between esoteric and scientific knowledge further confirms, precisely, that the constitution of modern (natural-scientific, anthropological, medical, etc.) knowledge is intimately connected with that of esotericism.

Ad 5. Esotericism between knowledge and belief: The epistemology of esotericism stands in a dialectical relation not only to scientific knowledge, but also to religious belief. From this confrontation between knowledge and belief, esotericism emerges as a hybrid formation: as a speculative knowledge.

- 5.1. In the epistemology of esotericism, the religious becomes a question of knowledge, and conversely, knowledge became a question of religion. The epistemology of esotericism is characterized by the fact that it is located as something heterogeneous (hybrid) between religion and knowledge.
- 5.2. This is also the foundation for a large part of its irritation for normative religious beliefs (as in the analogous case of normative scientific knowledge). Opposition from the churches and religious institutions which order discourse is a given. Esotericism is demonized as “false” belief, as heresy, or as “superstition.”
- 5.3. The very fact of an anti-esoteric reflex in relevant theological polemics demonstrates that the discursive moment of esoteric epistemology lies precisely in its placement between religion and science, between belief and knowledge.

Ad 6. Esotericism, myth, literature: esotericism brings knowledge to the very boundaries of myth and literature. It is not built primarily on logical-rational foundations or empirical proof, but on narrative, imaginal, aesthetic construction, which can be qualified as speculative, idealistic, utopian or fantastic according to one's perspective.

- 6.1. The knowledge of esotericism does not shrink from mythical inventions and literary procedures.
- 6.2. Like myth, the epistemology of esotericism is, for example, guided by a concept of Origin and of Tradition, i.e., by the idea of a primordial knowledge that has been lost and must be reconstituted in the actual present. In this sense, there is an epigonic element to esotericism: it processes an original delay and restitutes a lost tradition.
- 6.3. The epistemology of esotericism invents narratives of history, the cosmos, divinity, humanity, etc. It is built upon the *narrativity*, even the inventability (*inventio*) of knowledge.
- 6.4. Esotericism works openly and affirmatively with literary (aesthetical, rhetorical, *poetological*) methods. It lends an epistemological function to similes, parables, metaphors, images, etc.

Ad 7. The epistemology of esotericism in the history of knowledge: The epistemological signature of esotericism is not anhistorical, but is subject to the dynamics of historical and cultural conditions and interpretations. It is the result of ever new discursive negotiations and displacements.

- 7.1. In the Middle Ages, specifically in scholastic theology, esoteric knowledge is excluded from theology-based knowledge as *artes incertae* resp. *prohibitae* accused of heresy. The speculative knowledge about nature of the esoteric arts is placed under theological verdict and is demonized. At most, magic is permitted in a theologically purified form in the name of God (*otioth we-muftaim*), but not as sorcery (*kischuf*).
- 7.2. In early modernity, it becomes possible to integrate the knowledge of esotericism under the premises of a new, optimistic perspective of nature, and no longer needs to be sanctioned by prohibition. For example, as *magia naturalis*, magic gains some credibility in relation to rational concepts of knowledge. In this sense, one should not strictly speak of esotericism in early modernity: its arcane knowledge is exoteric.
- 7.3. The Enlightenment negotiates the relation of knowledge and belief, esotericism and exotericism, anew. Under the premise of a concept of science guided by reason and experience, the domain of the esoteric is constituted as that of a non-official, occult knowledge. What in the Middle Ages had to be excluded from the "correct" faith as "uncertain," "forbidden" and "heretical" is now demarcated from "correct" knowledge as "stupidity" and "superstition."
- 7.4. In the 19th century, the spread of science, positivism, historicism etc. radi-

calize the epistemological exclusion of esotericism. But precisely in this provocative constellation does it come to insist most strongly on its own identity: in occultism (theosophy, spiritualism, parapsychology, New Age, etc.). Here the esoteric has become a speculative counter-knowledge against the modern knowledge understood as based on rationality, empirical proof and instrumental applicability.

- 7.5. From the perspective of history of knowledge, esotericism falsifies the classic secularization thesis according to which questions of religious belief give way increasingly to questions of knowledge. Esotericism shows that the process of modernization is ever again disrupted by dialectical moves and tensions, in which religion, myth and knowledge mutually provoke, demarcate and at the same time enable one another.
- 7.6. Esotericism appears as the uncanny of modernity: as the return of what had been forgotten and believed to be defeated.

Hermes and his Students in Amsterdam

JOYCE PIJENBURG

Joost R. Ritman (founder of the library), Esther Oosterwijk-Ritman (general director and librarian) and the board and staff of the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* (BPH) would like to extend their warmest congratulations to the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents of the University of Amsterdam (GHF) on the occasion of its tenth anniversary.

Over the last ten years, the BPH has seen its number of visitors increase; naturally, the presence of GHF has been a contributing factor to this. Students come to the library to study for papers or presentations, and lecturers at GHF regularly organize tours for their students. In general, the public awareness of our common field of interest has grown. It was fortunate that the GHF's foundation committee decided to establish the center in Amsterdam. The city was a major center in the *history* of Hermetic philosophy and related currents (especially in publishing) in the 17th century; at present it is developing into a focal point of expertise in Hermetic *historiography*.

In the context of this celebration I will briefly outline the library's collection, with a particular focus on rare books and *terra incognita*: items of special interest for the historiography of Hermetic philosophy and related currents.¹ I will also devote a few words to the BPH's research institute and publishing house.

Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica

Joost R. Ritman, who founded the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica* in 1957, was presented with a 17th-century edition of the *Aurora* of Jacob Boehme on his 23rd birthday in 1964, a gift which inspired him to collect early printed books and manuscripts and to gradually build a library that thematically corresponded to his interests as a Rosicrucian. In the following decades, this library grew into a substantial collection of resources in the field of Christian Hermetic gnosis. The library opened its doors to the public in 1984 and has remained "Hermetically open"² to anyone interested in this field, from general readers to scholars and students. Modern books (post-1800), reference works, and secondary literature can be consulted on the open shelves. The pre-1800 books and manuscripts can be studied upon request.

From the start, in 1983, Frans Janssen and José Bouman, two book historians who comprised the early staff of the library, worked on collecting, cataloguing, describing, and studying manuscripts and books in the domain of Christian Hermetic gnosis. Janssen, who was general director, assembled a large portion

of the pre-1800 collection on Ritman's behalf, traveling to auctions all over Europe and the United States. With the gradual expansion of the library, the staff increased as well. It currently numbers eight members, all of whom participate in the organization of the books.³

The five major collecting areas are Hermetica, Alchemy, Mysticism, Rosicrucians, and Gnosis & Western Esotericism. The name of the collecting area called Hermetica functions as a *pars pro toto* for a large domain. It refers both to the succession of *prisci theologi* (or primordial sages), particularly as listed by Marsilio Ficino in the 15th century⁴ and to the reception history of Hermetism and *prisca theologia*. A number of early editions of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and other Hermetic texts are especially noteworthy; I will mention three of these.

The very first edition of Marsilio Ficino's Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (actually the first 14 treatises) was published in Treviso in 1471, unbeknownst to Ficino. Like much contemporary scholarly work, the translation, which was already completed in 1463, first circulated in manuscript copies. It contains a preface from "Hermes" himself to the reader, which was added to the text by someone other than Ficino:

You, whoever you be that reads these things..., know that I am Mercury Trismegistus, that same Mercury Trismegistus whom the ancient Egyptian and barbarian theologians, and later the Christians, admired with astonished wonder. So if you buy me and read me, you will have great advantages, because although you can procure me at a small expense, I will bestow on you the highest enjoyment and usefulness ...⁵

Recently, the library acquired a copy of an edition of Ficino's translation printed on vellum by Johann Schöffer (the son of Johannes Gutenberg's successor Peter Schöffer) in Mainz in 1503. Books printed on vellum from this period are very rare and vellum was comparatively expensive; it is therefore likely that the patron who commissioned it was an important figure.⁶ The BPH also has a unique Dutch edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum* from 1643, on permanent loan from the Amsterdam University Library.⁷ It is an interleaved copy containing erudite commentary and drawings by Reinier de Graaf Jr. (1674-1717), an artist with Hermetic leanings and the son of the famous doctor, Reinier de Graaf.

Naturally the "divine Plato"⁸ himself is not absent from this collecting area. Apart from the earliest editions of Ficino's translations of the dialogues (Florence, 1484-1485), for instance, the library also owns a Latin translation of and commentary to the *Timaeus* by Calcidius (A.D. 3rd-4th century), which was published in 1520. Because a larger font was not yet available for Roman type, the printer used Gothic type for the headings and Roman type for the main text. The edition is imbued with marginal notes by an educated contemporary.

Besides the *prisci theologi*, the Hermetica section includes works of many Platonists who were also translated by Ficino, such as Xenocrates, Plotinus and Synesius. Some manuscripts of works of the influential Platonist-Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius (A.D. 5th-6th century) are also of interest. The author

represented himself as Dionysius Areopagita, the Athenian convert of Paul mentioned in Acts (17:34). Following on the Latin translations of the 9th century, he was also confused with St. Denis (3rd century). The BPH owns two manuscripts of his works. First to be mentioned are the early-14th-century Latin paraphrases and translations from various works of Pseudo-Dionysius, written on vellum in a Gothic bookhand. Second, the beautifully illuminated manuscript of Ambrogio Traversari's Latin translation (1450) of various works dating back to the 6th century, includes Pseudo-Dionysius' *De Coelestis Hierachia*. As is often the case, the copyists are anonymous.

The library's Alchemy collection is relatively large and includes some 150 early modern and modern alchemical manuscripts. From the 15th to the 20th centuries, alchemical works were often handed down in manuscript form, even when the printed book was long standard. An interesting example is a 17th-century manuscript (BPH 366) of a work attributed to Johannes Isaac Hollandus, *Hand of the Philosophers*. It contains an illustration of an "alchemical hand" whose fingers symbolically stand for alchemical elements.¹⁰ It was copied before the first known printed edition of this work (1677, in German). The manuscript was once owned by William Backhouse (1593-1662), who, towards the end of his life, allegedly imparted the secret of transmutation to his "spiritual son" Elias Ashmole.

It remains unclear why the tradition of copying manuscripts survived after the introduction of the printing press. At any rate, even in the days of Arthur E. Waite (1857-1942), it was still common practice for esotericists and occultists to exchange and copy each other's printed books and manuscripts on alchemy. An example is Julius Kohn's *Excerptenbuch* (BPH 277, ca. 1900), containing extracts in English of alchemical and esoteric works from the 15th to the 19th centuries.¹¹

The Mysticism section also includes many noteworthy manuscripts, some of which even date from the medieval period. One of these (BPH 206) is *Hier bēghint een cleyne boeckijne van gheesteliken opclimmen*: a Middle Dutch translation of an important work from the medieval spiritual movement known as Modern Devotion, *De Spiritualibus Ascensionibus* by Zerbolt van Zutphen. It was probably copied in the early 15th century and contains marginal corrections and comments. Another manuscript (BPH 208) of the same work in the original Latin, dates from the second half of the 15th century. Also of interest is the early 16th-century *florilegium* from the *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, a compilation of mystical visions of the Cistercian nun Mechthild von Hackeborn (1241-1298), as recorded by her fellow sisters. The manuscript, also a Middle Dutch translation, is largely written on paper, in various hands.

The Lutheran spiritualist Jacob Boehme figures prominently in the Mysticism section. Special items in the Boehme collection are, first of all, the copy text of *Mysterium Magnum* containing extensive instructions for the compositor as well as copious marginalia in the hand of Abraham Willemsz van Beyerland. Second and third, this part of the collection includes a very rare first edition of Boehme's *Weg zu Christo* (1624), and an otherwise unknown anthology of Boehme's works called *Weg der Wiedergeburt* (1728). Finally, the library owns four hitherto unknown 18th-century manuscripts of Boehme's works.¹²

The Rosicrucians collecting area also makes up a substantial part of the library's holdings. The BPH holds first editions of the Rosicrucian manifestos *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614), *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615) and the alchemical allegory *Chymische Hochzeit* (1616) (the latter was written by Johann Valentin Andreae; the authorship of the other two manifestos is still contested). There are also many responses to the manifestos, part of the flood of publications evoked by the legendary Brotherhood. One example is the intriguing *Frauen Zimmer der Schwestern des Rosinfarben Creutzes* (1620), allegedly composed in "Parthenopolis" (Gr: "the city of the maiden/maidens"). The authors first address five major problems they encountered in the original manifestos. The final issue deals with the following question:

*Warumb das diese Bruder nuhr allein Mans personen in jhren schriften gedencken / und keiner Weibs-bilder / als wan sie von den Weibs-bilderen nicht geboren waren / oder / aber das sie ... die Weiber fur keine Menschen achten / Sed malam herbam / und darumb dieser ihrer Weißheit nicht fahich zu sein vermeinen.*¹³

No definitive answer is offered. However, the reader is notified that a "Fraawen-Zimmer" or "Gynecäum" (a fellowship of women) in fact had existed for years. Its members were long in possession of "the same science, wisdom and art, and even a number of secrets." The bulk of the treatise concerns the doctrines and goals of this Rosicrucian "Women's lodge" – whether or not fictional – governed by "Sophia Christina."

The Gnosis & Western Esotericism collecting area also contains largely unexplored sections, including the Arthur E. Waite and Gustav Meyrink (1868-1932) collections, acquired respectively in 2003 and 2005. The Waite collection comprises a wide range of this occultist scholar's personal documents, including a diary and notes, private and business correspondence, typescripts, and the earliest editions of works he wrote, translated, or prepared for publication. The earliest edition of the famous Rider-Waite tarot deck is also present. The Meyrink collection, consisting of material assembled over many years by Meyrink devotees, has recently been described,¹⁴ although the material and its biographical context still await detailed scrutiny. Principal items of this collection include letters of Meyrink and the typescript of the novel *Der Weisse Dominikaner*.

Ritman Institute and publishing house

The BPH also has a research center which aims to study the areas discussed above. The primary aims of the Ritman Institute are to make available and examine the early and rare printed books and manuscripts in the library's collection and generally, works in the areas of Christian, Platonic, Hermetic and gnostic traditions. Education and exhibition projects are also organized regularly, often in collaboration with other institutes.

Senior researcher Dr. Carlos Gilly has discovered Hermetic influences in the works of many 16th- and 17th-century intellectuals. Over the course of twenty

years, Gilly has been working on an extensive bibliography of early Rosicrucianism, which will be published in the near future. In the process, he has studied sources in libraries all over Europe. Consequently, his articles and books are a *Fundgrube* of hitherto unknown manuscripts and printed books. His *Adam Haslmayr: Der erste Verkünder der Manifeste der Rosenkreuzer* is a case in point. Haslmayr wrote the first response to the Rosicrucian manifesto(s), then still circulating in manuscript form: *Antwort an die Lobwürdige Brüderschafft der Theosophen von Rosencreutz* (1612). The treatise had long been thought lost when Gilly encountered it in the Anna-Amalia library in Weimar in 1992. The full text is now included in the Haslmayr book, which is a felicitous circumstance, since unfortunately a large part of the library burnt down in 2004. The fire destroyed many old printed books, including Haslmayr's *Antwort*. In effect, Gilly's facsimile is now the only surviving copy of this treatise. Gilly also wrote descriptions and articles for the catalogues accompanying the exhibitions organized in Florence and Rome in cooperation with the Biblioteca Laurenziana Medicea and the Biblioteca Marciana.¹⁶ They deal with problems of authorship, reception history and the cultural-historical context of the works exhibited.

Other ongoing research projects besides Gilly's bibliography of Rosicrucianism are, first, a detailed study of the so-called *Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer*, a series of beautifully designed symbolic plates, in manuscript and printed form, dating from the first half of the 18th to the first half of the 19th century (with earlier antecedents for the numerous images); second, a study of the library's considerable collection of medieval books of hours; and third, a Ph.D. project on imagery and philosophy of science in Giordano Bruno's later works, carried out in collaboration with GHF (promotor Wouter Hanegraaff, co-promotor Carlos Gilly).¹⁵

The library's publishing house, In de Pelikaan, publishes its own exhibition catalogues, as well as monographs and articles by researchers (both affiliated and not affiliated with the Ritman institute). Another important goal of the publishing house is the publication of source texts in the domain of Christian Hermetic gnosis. Examples of these are the three Dutch translations with commentary of antique Hermetic literature by Roelof van den Broek and the late Gilles Quispel (the last of which, entitled *Hermes Trismegistus* [2008, van den Broek] contains an extensive introduction describing the full range of the ancient Hermetica); Quispel's translation of the Gospel of Thomas (*Het Evangelie van Thomas uit het Koptisch vertaald en toegelicht*, 2004); and *De Keulse Mani-codex*, translated and edited by Johannes van Oort and Quispel (2005).

The study of the subjects discussed in the above has flourished in the past decade. As in the printing culture of 17th-century Amsterdam, this prosperity has been due to the benevolence of patrons and the efforts of scholars and students. We hope that in the future, the ties between our institutions will become even stronger and that the academic flower called Amsterdam will continue to blossom.

Notes

- 1 Modern and secondary works will be listed in the bibliography. I will mention authorship, year and place of publication and shelf marks of rare books and manuscripts in the main text or notes.
- 2 Accordingly, the visitor's guide, published in 2006, goes by this title (*Hermetically Open: Guide to the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica*).
- 3 Besides tasks in connection with the research institute and publishing house.
- 4 This succession of ancient sages or theologians according to Ficino varied, but Hermes always took a prominent place. In Ficino's preface to his translation of the Hermetic texts, he conceives the lineage as follows: "Thus, he [Mercurius Trismegistus] was called the first author of theology, and Orpheus followed him, taking second place in the ancient theology. After Aglaophemus, Pythagoras came next in the theological succession, having been initiated into the rites of Orpheus, and he was followed by Philolaus, teacher of our divine Plato. In this way, from a wondrous line of six theologians emerged a single system of ancient theology ..." (Translation following Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xlviii.)
- 5 Translation following Gentile and Gilly, *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Ermete Trismegisto / Marsilio Ficino and the Return of Hermes Trismegistus*, 59, with minor adjustments. The remainder of the preface tells us that Francesco Rolandello gave the manuscript to the printer Geraert van der Lye. The preface also figures in later editions of the translation. The edition and preface are succinctly described in *ibid.*, 59-61.
- 6 Frans Janssen is currently working on an article about this edition.
- 7 *Sesthien Boeken* (Amsterdam, 1643). It was translated by Abraham Willemsz. van Beyerland, the Dutch collector and disseminator of Jacob Boehme's works. On this edition, see Frank van Lamoen, "Hermes in het Licht van de Rede" and *idem* "In the Light of the Spirit." Van Lamoen is currently preparing an edition of this text.
- 8 Thus Ficino (see note 4 in the above).
- 9 This hand was depicted in works on alchemy since at least the beginning of the 17th century. See Telle, "Die 'Hand der filosofhen'."
- 10 See the exhibition catalogue *Tried and Tested*, 61-62.
- 11 For descriptions of all of these see Bouman and Janssen, "Mercurius Teutonicus in Amsterdam."
- 12 "Why these brothers only commemorate men in their writings and not women, as if they were not born from women, or do not consider women humans, but more like harmful plants, and thus do not judge them capable of their wisdom." The purported author of the response is "Famaugusta Franco Allemanica."
- 13 Harmsen, *Der magische Schriftsteller Gustav Meyrink, seine Freunde und sein Werk*.
- 14 These projects are carried out respectively by Theodor Harmsen and Carlos Gilly, Helen Wüstefeld, and myself.

- 15 Gilly and van Heertum, *Magia, Alchimia, Scienza / Magic, Alchemy and Science* and Gentile and Gilly, *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Ermete Trismegisto / Marsilio Ficino and the Return of Hermes Trismegistus*.

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