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Polemical Encounters

Esoteric Discourse and Its Others

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION: WESTERN ESOTERICISM AND POLEMICS

Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad

When adherents of one set of religious discourses and practices encounter other traditions, responses can vary across a spectrum from dialogue and peaceful coexistence via apologetics and controversy to outright conflict. This volume deals with a specific subset of such responses, as they have taken place within the religiously plural European milieu: polemics involving discourses and practices associated with western esotericism.[1] Such ideologically laden discourses have, of course, often been directed by outsiders—Christian theologians, rationalist skeptics, and others—against esotericists. However, there are many instances of polemics addressed by adherents of specific esoteric currents at those they perceive as their foes.[2]

1. *Religious Polemics in Scholarly Perspective*

'Polemics' is a term used to identify a rhetoric strategy that exceeds simple 'debate' in many ways. In classical rhetoric, 'polemics' (Gk., *polemiké téchne*) stands for an overpoweringly argumentational discourse. Its intent is the annihilation of the opponent's position, but often also even the annihilation of his or her very person. In so doing, it addresses an audience—which can be fictitious, to be sure—that offers support

[1] The term *western esotericism* will here be taken as a label for a historically related set of currents that include various blendings of Christian teachings with the Jewish kabbala, Hermeticism, and what is sometimes—and problematically—referred to as 'occult sciences' of astrology, alchemy, and magic. The term also includes later currents of thought that present either innovative syntheses of these influences or original formulations with an air of family resemblance. There are several, only partly compatible attempts to define this corpus of currents with greater theoretical rigor; for a discussion of these issues see, e.g., Hanegraaff, 'The Study of Western Esotericism', and von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism'.

[2] Although the present volume is predominantly comprised of contributions specially commissioned by the editors, the original impetus for this project derives from a series of sessions on polemics and western esotericism at the 19th World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, held in Tokyo in 2005.

for the polemical position. The corresponding antonym is 'apologetics' (Gk., *apologetikós*, '[discursively] defending'), as a technique of reacting to polemics defensively and in an attempt at justification. The two concepts are inextricably entwined: by defending one's own position, one questions that of others; by denouncing the doctrines and practices of others as false, one asserts one's own claims to orthodoxy and orthopraxy.[3] Together, both rhetorical genres can take on a wide variety of forms and interact in diverse ways.

Christianity has, since its earliest sources, been profoundly shaped by such boundary-constructing discourse. Several of the texts that came to form part of the New Testament canon insist that there is one and only one way to salvation, namely via Christ. The Gospel of John 14:6 famously lets Jesus proclaim that 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father, but by me'.[4] Similarly, Acts 4:12 asserts that 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved'. Much of the early Christian literature, unsurprisingly, builds on this exclusivism, in an attempt to distinguish the "correct" mode of obtaining salvation from various "false" doctrines.

A sizeable proportion of such early apologetic-cum-polemical writing was directed against the Jews.[5] Early Christian writers developed a genre of literature that contrasted the two traditions, consistently to the detriment of the Jews. The Church fathers insisted that the covenant as formulated in the Hebrew Bible was superseded, that Christian doctrine was superior to that of the Jews, that Jews misread their own scriptures by failing to apply an appropriately allegorical reading. Where Jewish doctrines were opposed to those of emerging Christianity, it was even possible for Christian polemicists to insist that Jews had corrupted and falsified their own scriptures.[6]

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[3] Interestingly, literature dealing specifically with religious polemics is quite limited; one exception is Hettema & van der Kooij (eds.), *Religious Polemics in Context*, although that volume adds little to systematic and methodological investigation of polemics in religious contexts. In contrast to the scarcity of publications dealing with religious polemics in particular, there is an extensive scholarship on Christian apologetics; see Barnard, 'Apologetik I', Steck, 'Apologetik II' and Müller-Schwefe, 'Apologetik III' for a three-part encyclopedic survey with extensive albeit somewhat dated bibliographies. From the perspective of the study of religion, see also the overview presented by Cancik, 'Apologetik/Polemik'.

[4] Passages from the Bible quote the New International Version.

[5] The literature is surveyed in Schreckenberg, *Die Christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*.

[6] This line of argumentation is later reproduced in Islamic discourse on the other

Although the fascination with the classical heritage led to a much more ambivalent attitude to "paganism" than toward Judaism, Christian writers did wage a war of words—and often enough not only of words—also with their Roman and Hellenistic competitors. From Origen's *Against Celsus* to Augustine's *City of God* and beyond, "paganism" was reviled for being superstitious, for failing to deliver on its promises, or for causing immoral behavior among the population. A range of opponents, from Pliny the Younger to (the early) Firmicus Maternus, in turn attacked the first Christian communities in vicious verbal tirades, not least because their exclusivism made their loyalty to the Roman state seem doubtful.

Early Christian writers not only fought perceived enemies from outside their own tradition, but also from within it. Christian orthodoxy thus took shape through centuries of polemics and apologetics against "false" interpretations of the nature of Christ and of his message. Out of a pluralistic milieu with many coexisting Christianities, an increasingly streamlined religion was slowly constructed.[7] Valentinians, Marcionites, Donatists, Arians, Manichaeans, and a host of others were depicted as deluded souls, in need of guidance and correction. Conversely, the proto-orthodox views were portrayed as natural consequences of revealed truth. The written word and the pressure of political authority went hand in hand in this disciplining process. In a polemical *tour de force*, Augustine managed to convey the idea that when dissenters were terrorized into submission, it was for their own good. When directed against heretics, intolerance and violent repression are signs of love:

> Why, therefore, should not the Church use force in compelling her lost sons to return, if the lost sons compelled others to their destruction? [. . .] Is it not a part of the care of the shepherd, when any sheep have left the flock, even though not violently forced away, but led astray by tender words and coaxing blandishments, to bring them back to the fold of his master when he has found them, by the fear or even the pain of the whip, if they show symptoms of resistance [. . .].[8]

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monotheistic faiths. God has revealed his message through many prophets, including Moses and Jesus. The Torah and the Gospels are thus also divine messages; or rather, they would be, if they had not been corrupted by Jews and Christians.

[7] The complex formation of the Christian canon and the parallel emergence of the Christian myth of origin are analyzed in Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*.

[8] Augustine, 'On the Correction of the Donatists', ch. 6.

As Marie Theres Fögen has brilliantly demonstrated, the same attitude was also part and parcel of the early Church's fight against Manichaeism on the one hand, and against astrology, divination, and magic, on the other. 'Only after a sufficient amount of people where convinced that Jesus was *not* a magician, could Christian emperors risk to condemn all magicians in the world'.[9] The fourth-century juridical discourse is an example *par excellence* of a polemical debate, as it involved both the juridical 'Othering' of the enemy and his physical annihilation.

> From now on the demons and their representatives were "juridified". It is this process that differentiates fourth-century law from Roman law of earlier times: Communication about right and wrong did not pertain just to the magicians; it divided the world into friends and foes, defining the former not only as right *believers* but also as right*ful* contemporaries, whereas it condemns the latter not only as dangerous but also as unrightful existences. [. . .] The magicians were only the prototypes of the *inimici*; they were the first heretics defined by law, the claws of which legions of subsequent heretics during centuries could not escape.[10]

A war of words was thus part and parcel of the emerging Christian tradition, and vast amounts of polemical texts against external and internal enemies have continued to be produced over the centuries. On the one hand, encounters with further non-Christian traditions produced polemical literature against perceived external foes. From the late seventh century, Islam in particular was singled out for attack for its perceived doctrinal errors. On the other hand, Christianity as a whole has been characterized by innumerable schisms, resulting up to the present day in high levels of verbal hostility directed toward dissenting voices. The Reformation, in particular, triggered an intense preoccupation with religious boundary work, to the extent that a self-styled polemical theology emerged. Robert Bellarmine's *Disputationes de controversiis Christiane fidei* or *Controversiae* (1586–1593) became an important point of departure for a Catholic theology intent on combating the Reformed churches. In Protestant circles, similar currents emerged in the seventeenth century.

In the contemporary period, liberal spokespersons for the Christian tradition have placed an increasingly negative valuation on polemics. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of a movement for a

[9] Fögen, *Enteignung der Wahrsager*, 17 (translation ours).
[10] Fögen, *Enteignung der Wahrsager*, 252–253 (translation ours).

"dialogue of religions", with the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions as its prototypical event. Whereas some elements of the conservative wing of Christianity have been reticent in accepting, much less embracing, the religious diversity of the contemporary world, to the point of accusing other religions of being satanic inventions, the irenic attitude toward others has become an important element in the self-understanding of a broad sweep of Christianities. Secular, liberal humanists portray themselves in a similar way, stressing tolerance and acceptance of others as key virtues. Tolerance, however, cannot extend equally toward everyone; one can only be tolerant toward specific groups, opinions, and practices. If a Christian fundamentalist preacher rants against Islam, one can choose to have a positive attitude toward Christian fundamentalism, or toward Islam, but it is difficult to see how one could be positive toward both without tying oneself into logical knots. Some level of hostility, it would seem, is inevitable in the encounter between different ideologies. In addition, it is a crucial element of all discourses of tolerance that tolerance presupposes *disagreement*; in a climate of indifference or consensus there is no need for tolerance.[11]

Although space has permitted only the sketchiest of summaries, it is clear from the above that the history of religions in Europe has been marked by an extreme pluralism and also by a high level of antagonism toward other religious alternatives than one's own.[12] Given this pervasive atmosphere of hostile interchanges, it is only to be expected that the rise and development of western esoteric currents should also have been profoundly affected by polemics. Indeed, Wouter J. Hanegraaff goes so far as to argue that the very emergence of western esotericism as a category is ultimately an effect of a 'grand polemical narrative' with which the various currents have been met.[13] Further elaboration of this discussion notwithstanding, it does indeed seem that "esotericism" is an

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[11] On the complex normative discussion about tolerance and its history see Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt*.

[12] Recent methodological discussions pertaining to the pluralistic character of European history of religion are systematically collected in Kippenberg, Rüpke & von Stuckrad (eds.), *Europäische Religionsgeschichte*. An English translation of that volume will be published in 2008. That the "Middle Ages" have been central in confronting religious pluralism is magnificently argued by Borgolte, *Europa entdeckt seine Vielfalt*; see also Borgolte, *Christen, Juden, Muselmanen*.

[13] Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge'. See also his chapter in the present volume. The notion of a 'grand polemical narrative' in part builds on Jan Assmann's concept of 'mnemohistory'; on the discussion pertaining to this concept see, e.g., Quack, 'Perspektiven'.

analytical category closely related to polemics. If we address esotericism as a structural element of European cultural discourses,[14] rather than as a typological label for a collection of "currents", the relation between esotericism and polemics becomes even more apparent.

The present collection of papers takes a more detailed look at three particular forms of boundary-drawing between esoteric discourse and its Others.

2. *Overview of the Chapters*

The first section concerns the encounter of Christian Europe with Jewish mysticism, and the polemics surrounding the role of kabbalah in the western religious landscape.

Kocku von Stuckrad takes a closer look at the emergence in the late fifteenth century of a Christian kabbalah. In particular, he directs our attention at the intellectual milieus where Christian and Jewish scholars could meet. In these circles, there was a lively interchange of information, and Jewish scholars played a significant role in translating and commenting kabbalistic texts for the benefit of their Christian counterparts. Nevertheless, Christian participants in these encounters largely used the information they were given in order to polemicize against Judaism. Predictably, Jewish kabbalists reacted with intense hostility, especially to various attempts to read Christian meanings into their mystical texts. These interconfessional circles (to borrow a term from Steven M. Wasserstrom)[15] were united by their passion for kabbalah, yet riven with tension because of their competing ways of understanding the materials with which they worked.

In his contribution, Konstantin Burmistrov takes his readers up to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, surveying the role of kabbalistic concepts and terms in Russian intellectual life. The interest in kabbalah shared by a number of Russian Masons was a topic of contention. On the one hand, Masonic authors placed themselves out of the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, and were therefore reviled by mainstream Russian Orthodox theologians. On the other hand, their interest in Jewish esotericism rendered them suspect in the eyes of Enlightenment

[14] One attempt at doing so is von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism'.
[15] Wasserstrom, 'Jewish-Muslim Relations', 69.

thinkers. Squeezed between two foes, Masons made uneasy attempts to align themselves with orthodoxy, suggesting that their own doctrines were scripturally sound, in fact more so than the misrepresentations of Scripture supposedly propagated by the churches. Despite of such controversies, interest in kabbalah spread from Masonic circles, and—in thoroughly reinterpreted shape—became a major influence in nineteenth-century Russian thought.

Steven M. Wasserstrom's chapter on Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) portrays a scholar with a conflicted attitude toward kabbalah. The profoundly irreligious Adorno repudiated Judaism as a lived religion. His intense distaste for anything that could be construed as "irrational" made him loathe occultism. All the more surprisingly, Adorno was interested in at least some aspects of kabbalah, e.g. kabbalistic views on language, albeit in a suitably de-Judaized and demythologized form, and deferred to Gershom Scholem's expertise in unraveling the complexities of Jewish mysticism. Despite their many differences, a friendship and extended collaboration developed between Scholem, who labored to retrieve and revalidate an important sector of the Jewish tradition, and Adorno, the militant anti-religionist who ultimately used kabbalah in order to reject Judaism.

Boaz Huss examines the relations between kabbalah scholarship and kabbalah advocacy in a post-Jewish context. The crucial role played by Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) in introducing an academic readership to Jewish esotericism is well known. An often overlooked aspect of Scholem's work on kabbalah is his intense distaste for various esoteric, neo-Romantic, and popular understandings of kabbalah. Although by no means a kabbalist himself, Scholem took on the role of caretaker for what he saw as authentic "Jewish mysticism", in opposition to various "debased" forms. Scholem's influence in this respect has been so great that contemporary writers have inherited this tendency to pass theological judgments on their object of study, and to polemicize against insufficiently purist kabbalisms.

The second section considers various ways in which interconfessional polemics have been instrumental in the formation of a distinct identity for esoteric currents.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff grapples with the history of esotericism more broadly, suggesting that a crucial element in the politics of identity that set esoteric currents apart from mainstream ideologies as different from each other as secular science and Church-endorsed theologies was their different attitudes to images and to discursive reasoning. Hanegraaff

argues that there is a strong tendency in western culture to pit the abstract, omnipresent and limitless one God of monotheism against the immanent pagan gods, visible in their statues and images, and to denounce the imagistic cult of the latter as fundamentally misguided. Images, he suggests, have an unsettling power that monotheisms will typically reject as "idolatrous". Esoteric currents become identified as such by a process of rejection that bundles together a most diverse range of worldviews and practices because they are imagined to share a positive interest in images.

Hanns-Peter Neumann examines the religious plurality characteristic of Germany in the second half of the sixteenth century. Various movements and authors attempted to navigate in this religious landscape by polemically constructing themselves as "orthodox" and their opponents as "heretics". The Paracelsians, in particular, attempted to "reform the Reformation". Some of Paracelsus' followers constructed intricate syncretisms, in which e.g. alchemy was related to the Christian history of salvation and creation. Such Paracelsian theologies were obviously quite distinct from contemporary ecclesiastical orthodoxy, and occasioned the emergence of a double polemics. On the one hand, Paracelsian readings of the Christian tradition were seen as "heretical" by a number of their opponents. On the other, the Paracelsians condemned what they felt was the hypocrisy of theologians and church officials.

Peter Hanns Reill discusses the case of Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791), a leading Enlightenment theologian who toward the end of his life—and to the consternation of many of his contemporaries—embraced alchemy. Whereas these interests have usually been dismissed as irrelevant to his Enlightenment theological project, Reill argues for a different reading of Semler's pursuits. Semler attempted to create a form of Hermeticism imbued with Enlightenment values and explicitly distanced himself from the types of esotericism propounded by his contemporaries. Semler was one of a number of Enlightenment thinkers engaged in a polemical war on three fronts. They fought against a religious orthodoxy that they felt was outdated. They battled against an emerging mechanistic world-view. They also, however, polemicized against other esotericists, not in order to reject esotericism as such, but to create what they saw as an adequately modernized version thereof.

Renko Geffarth examines one of the more spectacular incidents in the history of eighteenth-century Freemasonry, that of Johann Georg Schrepfer (1739–1774). A self-made man, Schrepfer created his own

set of (para-) Masonic rituals, and thereupon engaged in a long series of polemical interchanges with his detractors from within the Masonic milieu, as well as in surrounding society. While it may seem obvious that any organization is man-made and any rituals—Schrepfer's as well as those of more traditional Masons—are historical constructions, Schrepfer's innovations were perceived by many as inauthentic, while Schrepfer himself was described as an impostor. Schrepfer replied to his critics in similar terms, questioning the legitimacy of the more established Masonic groups. His fantastic necromantic rituals were attacked by skeptical critics as crude trickery. On the other hand, he attracted numerous supporters, people who e.g. declared that they had been eye witnesses to Schrepfer's magical feats. The conflicts surrounding the controversial necromancer came to an end only after his suicide.

The third section focuses on the role of polemics in the shaping of esoteric discourses in the context of modernity.

Whereas popular esotericism in contemporary society is routinely depicted in hostile texts as the epitome of unreason, esoteric discourse will readily counter by accusing their secular as well as Christian opponents of intolerance and bigotry. In their attempts to formulate a culture critique, it will often be tempting to construct a counter-argument revolving around a past, golden age. Brannon Ingram's chapter on Traditionalism focuses on the primeval wisdom that, according to founding figure René Guénon, guided mankind before the spiritual fall of modernity took place. Two prominent aspects of Guénon's rhetoric stand out in Ingram's analysis. Guénon's nostalgia for the primeval wisdom of the past is predicated on the very modernity that was so distasteful to him. It also led him to formulate his writings in a remarkably vitriolic tone.

Popularized esoteric discourse is at odds with the normative epistemologies embraced by the natural sciences. Although most members of the scientific community presumably have neither the time nor inclination to fight esoteric pursuits, specific interest groups have taken on this battle. Olav Hammer's contribution on the verbal battles between dowsers and skeptics outlines how both sides in the argument over the validity of dowsing accuse their counterparts of holding preconceived ideas and of not being open to the evidence at hand. By doing so, however, dowsers who engage the skeptics in this war on words have already conceded one important point to their opponents, namely that dowsing has the same epistemological status as a science. Literature

directed at other dowsers, however, shows a quite different picture: here, the practice of dowsing is represented as a pursuit with distinctly spiritual overtones.

A similar return to the past as in René Guénon is described in Dylan Burns' contribution. Rather than decrying the present by constructing an entirely mythical historiography, a number of different contemporary authors have seen the gnosticizing *Gospel of Thomas* as documenting an alternative and more humane version of Christianity. Within the broad New Age milieu, diverse interpretations can redescribe the original text as a path toward psychological individuation, an exposition of the perennial philosophy, a tract embodying a holistic cosmology, even as an exhortation to follow the principles of macrobiotics. An important aspect of such *Gospel of Thomas* receptions is the way in which current scholarship on this text is appropriated for purposes for which it was presumably never intended. Modern esoteric authors selectively side with researchers whose results they feel support their own contentions, and will do so e.g. by rephrasing tentative hypotheses as if they were unproblematic truths. Other authors and other opinions with perhaps similar support from the community of *Thomas* scholars are not even mentioned, much less engaged with.

Despite the heated verbal interchanges between esotericists and surrounding society, esotericists, for legal, financial, and other reasons often find themselves dependent on various forms of official recognition. Titus Hjelm addresses this issue by examining a local case: the attempt by adherents of contemporary Witchcraft in Finland to have their tradition accepted as a religious community under Finnish law. Contemporary Witches form a very loosely united milieu of individual practitioners, with their perceived historical victimization by outsiders as one of few uniting factors. Modern Witches have, for instance, reacted against media stereotypes depicting their practices as at best a fad of the youth subculture. One way of addressing such issues has been by adopting a double strategy. On the one hand, Witches who wish to underscore the "seriousness" of their tradition can doubt the motives of new recruits to the movement. On the other hand, one umbrella organization has—without success—attempted to apply for the status of registered religious community. This failure has led at least some Witches to call for a more intense maintenance of doctrinal purity among their co-religionists.

3. *Recapitulation and Outlook*

The twelve papers in the present collection span more than half a millennium, from the Renaissance to the present day, and present details of a quite divergent set of case studies. Nonetheless, these chapters are not "just case studies". They should be read as *exempla* for the complex dynamic of polemics and esotericism in western culture. Following Jonathan Z. Smith's dictum, *exempla* should have three characteristics:

> First, that the exemplum has been well and fully understood. This requires a mastery of both the relevant primary material and the history and tradition of its interpretation. Second, that the exemplum be displayed in the service of some important theory, some paradigm, some fundamental question, some central element in the academic imagination of religion. Third, that there be some method for explicitly relating the exemplum to the theory, paradigm, or question and some method for evaluating each in terms of the other.[16]

Against such a methodological background, several trends can be spotted in the material presented in this volume. All contributions affirm the centrality of polemical writings in creating boundaries around one's own doctrines and practices, forging alliances with select others and demarcating oneself in opposition to perceived ideological foes. They underline the complex ways in which polemics adapt to the tacit presuppositions of each historical period. They point at the ways in which individuals and groups at the receiving end of polemical discourse have adapted their claims in order to present themselves as orthodox, as worthy of serious consideration, or as rational. Not least, they underline the centrality of verbal, as well as concrete physical, hostility in European history of religion, against a romanticizing, even sentimentalist historiography that prefers to focus on what today has become known as the dialogue of religions.

Research in social psychology shows that exposure to a variety of divergent opinions on a controversial issue reinforces polarization.[17] Rather than fostering tolerance or relativism, broad and diverse information tends to strengthen one's commitment to the views that one already holds. One sobering conclusion from the present collection of papers is that the same mechanisms would seem to apply to the

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[16] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi–xii.
[17] Lord, Ross & Lepper, 'Biased Assimilation'.

domain of religion. One of the earliest Christian writers, Justin Martyr (100–165), entitled his polemical tract against the Jews *Dialogue with Trypho*. Since then, countless representatives of various traditions have regularly entered into dialogue with each other, but their goal in doing so has, more often than not, been to strengthen the position of their own community, at the expense of their interlocutors.

Polemics can, in a more ironic sense, foster rapprochement. Several contributions show how the weaker interlocutor in a polemical interchange will accept the rules of the discourse, as dictated by the stronger party. Diviners in contemporary society, e.g. dowsers, are ridiculed by skeptics for not being able to produce empirical evidence for the validity of their claims. Anthropological studies of divination suggest other models that make more sense of divination than to regard it as a "failed science". Following a classic discussion by Philip Peek, divination could be seen as a way of enabling diviners to tap into a more intuitive mode of thinking.[18] Alternatively, Roy Rappaport's theory of ritual could make sense of divination as a way of embedding the here-and-now of the client (the self-referential messages, in Rappaport's terminology) in a culturally accepted, meaningful setting (Rappaport's canonical messages).[19] Although these and other options would potentially be open to diviners interested in defending their practices, the skeptical agenda dominates the field to such an extent that the polemical interchange between dowsers and skeptics is carried out on the terms of the latter. Similarly, as we have seen, at least some Witches in Finland have attempted to gain state recognition by adapting to legal, normative standards of what counts as a "genuine religion".

As suggested above, the contemporary period has seen religious polemics relegated to the more conservative sectors of Christianity. Attitudes toward the esoteric clearly reflect this trend. Various Christian churches adopt a wide variety of approaches in addressing the most popular and widespread manifestations of esoteric thought today: the New Age.[20] At the most conservative end of the spectrum are evangelical and fundamentalist writers who in New Age thinking see a wholesale onslaught against the spiritual foundations of modern civilization. The conclusion that some draw from this premise, is that

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[18] Peek, *African Divination Systems*.
[19] Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion*, chapter 2, esp. 52–54.
[20] Saliba, *Christian Responses*.

New Age thinking, despite its overt individualism and diversity, must be a massive conspiracy, ultimately guided by the Devil. Liberal churches tend rather to watch New Age enthusiasms with a certain bemusement, or perhaps with a sentiment that these "alternative" trends are symptomatic of a spiritual hunger that Christians should attempt to understand and address.

The fact that Christian polemics is no longer as shrill as it once used to be, by no means implies that esotericists can ply their trade in peace. The role of prime critic has been taken over by interest groups presenting a perspective based on the natural sciences. In a programmatic statement posted on its web site, the best-known skeptical organization, CSICOP, proclaims that its purpose is to 'encourage the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public'.[21] Admittedly, far from all of the topics discussed in skeptical publications are esoteric or part of the New Age, even by the most generous definition. Nevertheless, characteristic New Age practices such as divination, complementary and alternative medicine in its many guises, UFO's, channeling, and so forth, are prime targets of debunking. The main religious traditions present numerous controversial empirical claims, from prophetic revelation to the Resurrection, but these non-esoteric claims are much less often challenged.

Finally, a survey of the crucial issues that have divided the various groups that engage in verbal aggression tends to show that practically anything can serve as grist for the polemical mill. Under the sweeping accusations of being immoral, deluded, or heretical, lurk precise points of disagreement that differ radically from one polemical context to another. A sweep over the history of religions in the West will come up with a catalogue of at times truly exotic reasons for distancing oneself from others. Three cases of religious polemics and schism, taken more or less at random from the mass of potential examples, are the question of whether the serpent in the garden of Eden communicated in a human language when it spoke to Eve in the third chapter of Genesis,[22] the issue of whether the sign of the cross should be made with two or

[21] www.csicop.org (accessed 25 December 2006).

[22] A conflict between two Reformed churches in the Netherlands arose over this issue in the 1920s.

three fingers,[23] and the concern over whether it was permissible for a Byzantine emperor to remarry four times or only three.[24] The question whether interreligious polemics, despite such overt disparity, can be subsumed under any core characteristics is by no means settled. Wouter J. Hanegraaff sees polemics as a struggle between ideas, and suggests that fundamental conflicts between monotheism and polytheism/paganism are crucial to the polemics between mainstream Christianity and its Others.[25] An alternative reading of polemical discourse would argue that conflicts between religious factions can be understood primarily in sociological terms, i.e. as struggles over influence and as ways of marking and stereotyping social identities.[26] If the conflict between ideas is subservient to such social processes, this would help to explain why apparently minute theological differences become so laden with significance.

Although such common trends are readily apparent from the present collection of case studies, this volume also demarcates a field where research is clearly still in its infancy, and implicitly points out potential avenues of research. Two desiderata, in particular, emerge from this endeavor. The first is the application to religious polemics—whether or not these involve western esoteric currents—of the many insights into combative speech, gained in other disciplines. Discourse analysis in its many guises, argumentation theory,[27] the psychology of stereotyping and the research into the social construction of categories such as "deviance" are some of the areas where advances have been made in understanding how words can construct cultural realities, not least in-groups versus out-groups.

The second, more distant but obviously related goal, is the development of a grammar of alterity, sophisticated enough to take into account the polemics and counter-polemics between spokespersons of various religious communities.[28] Jonathan Z. Smith has famously remarked that

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[23] This was the overt reason for the seventeenth century schism between Russian Orthodox and Old Believers.

[24] One of the issues that put a wedge between Eastern and Western churches was the fourth remarriage of Emperor Leo VI (886–912).

[25] Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge'.

[26] See, e.g., Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*; Cohen, *Signifying Identities*; Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*.

[27] Examples include Benoit, Hample & Benoit (eds.), *Readings in Argumentation*; Memering & Palmer, *Discovering Arguments*.

[28] Useful contributions for the study of religion are collected in Baumann & Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*. See also Corbey & Leerssen (eds.), *Alterity, Identity, Image*.

we already have a surplus of data, but sorely lack theories that can account for the data.[29] The study of religious polemics as an element in the European history of religion generally, and in the emergence of esoteric discourse in particular, is still so young that, *pace* Smith, more data are welcome indeed. Nevertheless, here as in so many other sectors of the study of religion, we do need theorizing that can make better sense of the many ethnographic and historical details.

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[29] Smith, 'In Comparison a Magic Dwells', 35.

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PART ONE

KABBALAH IN POLEMICAL PERSPECTIVE

CHRISTIAN KABBALAH AND ANTI-JEWISH POLEMICS: PICO IN CONTEXT

Kocku von Stuckrad

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) has been the subject of much scholarly debate. On the one hand, it has been noted that this Renaissance intellectual, who became acquainted with Jewish mysticism through personal and friendly contact with Jews, was one of the most influential mediators to effect a reception of Jewish kabbalah in Christian circles. On the other hand, it has been argued that Pico used the tradition of Jewish kabbalah as a weapon against the Jews, thus participating in an anti-Jewish campaign waged by representatives of Renaissance Christianity and preparing the way for anti-Semitic currents in modern culture.

The arguments for the latter proposition are easy to follow, considering the strongly anti-Jewish dictums in his works and in the 900 theses Pico wanted to discuss in Rome with delegates from all over Europe. As is well known, the invitation to debate his theses was declined by Pope Innocence VIII, and Pico had to restrict himself to publishing the huge project.[1] In his sevenfold commentary on the six days of Genesis, written in 1489 and published as *Heptaplus*, Pico's anti-Jewish intentions culminated in sentences such as the following: 'Against the stony hearts of the Hebrews it [i.e., Pico's interpretation] will provide you with powerful weapons drawn from their own arsenals'.[2] And after having used evidence from Jewish sources, particularly from the Talmud, Pico concludes: 'If they [i.e., the Jews] continue impudently and stubbornly to deny this, let them listen to their own Talmudists, who strongly support our opinion'.[3] The strategy is clear: On the one hand, Pico wants to show that the Jewish mystical tradition proves the

[1] The theses went to press on 7 December 1486. For an in-depth study of Pico's project see Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*.

[2] '*Vnde & uobis potentissima tela contra lapideum cor Hebrẹorum de armentarijs eorum petita subministrabuntur*' (*Heptaplus*, in Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, 51). All translations of quotations are mine, if not noted otherwise.

[3] '[*Q*]*uod si impudenter & pertinaciter negare pertendant, audiant suos Thalmutistas nostram sententiam maxime roborantes*' (*Heptaplus*, in Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, 54).

Christian truth (and thus, we could also argue that Pico's intention is to convert his Christian readers to kabbalah!); on the other hand, he wants to use kabbalistic tradition to convince the Jews and convert them to Christianity. Not surprisingly, Klaus Reichert concludes:

> These are not optional readings but decisive ones, and Christian Kabbalists to come knew how to proceed. [. . .] Thus the entrance of Jewish thinking into the ken of Christianity was a double-edged affair: it opened up new continents of meaning and at the same time it was taken out of the hands of their originators in an act of appropriation and supersession.[4]

In this article I do not intend to deny the outspoken anti-Jewish polemics in Pico's writing. Rather, I want to raise the question how these polemics relate to the fact that Pico gratefully acknowledged the enormous erudition of the Jewish kabbalists, used their help extensively, was encouraged by Jews to publish his theses, and concluded his theses with the famous proposition: 'As true astrology teaches us to read in the Book of God, kabbalah teaches us to read in the Book of Law'.[5] I will argue that more is at stake here than simple anti-Judaism and that we need a more complex model of interpretation to understand the dynamics of interreligious polemics in early modern Europe. To substantiate this argument, I will refer to recent research into the pluralistic character of European history of religions and the exchange between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars in the Renaissance.

But first, it is important to recapitulate Pico's personal contact with Jews and their mystical texts.

1. *Pico in Context*

Pico della Mirandola is one of the most influential figures in fifteenth-century esotericism. He studied canon law in Bologna (1477–1478), rhetoric, philosophy, theology, and some neighboring disciplines in Ferrara (1479), Florence (1479 or 1480), Padua (1480–1482), Pavia

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[4] Reichert, 'Pico della Mirandola and the Beginnings of Christian Kabbala', 207. Yeshaiah Sonne, 'The Place of the Kabbalah', similarly views the Church's use of Kabbalah as a mere means to convert the Jews. See also Stow, *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy*, 204–208; and, more generally, Coudert, 'Seventeenth-Century Christian Hebraists'. An excellent overview of the topic is provided by Coudert & Shoulson (eds.), *Hebraica Veritas?*.

[5] '*Sicut uera Astrologia docet nos legere in libro Dei, ita Cabala docet nos legere in libro legis*' (Pico della Mirandola, *Opera Omnia*, 113; cf. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 552).

(1482–1483), again in Florence (1484), and in Paris (1485–1486). Although Pico never gained a university degree, his erudition was celebrated even during his lifetime.

Particularly the opening lecture that Pico had prepared for the disputation in Rome—later to become known as 'On the Dignity of Man'—laid the ground for an almost mythical evaluation of Pico in the eyes of subsequent generations. Jacob Burckhardt, for instance, ennobled him in 1860 with the words: 'The highest intuitions on this area Pico della Mirandola expresses in his oration On the Dignity of Man, which could certainly be ranked among the noblest bequests of this cultural epoch'.[6] Pico became the "symbol of his age", a precursor of modernity that was to free the human being from the enslavement of religion and superstition. William G. Craven critically reassessed this exaggerated image and demonstrated that it stems from modern culture's self-fashioning, rather than from Pico's own contribution.[7] In Craven's understanding, Pico was simply a pious Christian who drew "evidence" for the truth of Christianity from all available traditions. He was not a "syncretistic" or "pantheistic" thinker, nor was he dependent on Ficino.[8] Even if we do not completely follow Craven in this judgment,

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[6] 'Die höchsten Ahnungen auf diesem Gebiet spricht Pico della Mirandola aus in seiner Rede von der Würde des Menschen, welche wohl eines der edelsten Vermächtnisse der Kulturepoche heißen darf' (Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 262). For a classic study, see Cassirer, 'Giovanni Pico della Mirandola'. See also Reichert, 'Pico della Mirandola and the Beginnings of Christian Kabbala', 203–204: 'Pico's emphasis on man's free will is the one great concept for which he became and is still famous. It was the great trumpet blow, the ignition of the Renaissance'. In his footnote, however, Reichert also acknowledges the influence of Yohanan Alemanno with reference to Idel's revaluation (see below). As a recent voice, I quote Fabricio Lelli who labels Pico's oration 'an outstanding manifesto of the Renaissance conception of the role played by man within Creation' (Lelli, 'Pico della Mirandola', 950).

[7] Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*; see also Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 234–236. Additional evidence for this is the fact that the title of the lecture, 'On the Dignity of Man', is by no means the originally intended one; as Stephen A. Farmer notes, 'Pico's original title, if he had one, was something on the order of *Oratio ad laudes philosophiae* (Oration in Praise of Philosophy). The traditional title *Oratio de hominis dignitate* first appeared ten years after Pico's death in a corrupt German reprint of his collected works' (Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 2 note 4).

[8] Cf. for instance, Reichert, 'Pico della Mirandola and the Beginnings of Christian Kabbala', 195, who calls Ficino 'Pico's great teacher'. More likely, however, is Farmer's evaluation: 'At Rome, Pico planned to propose an interpretation of the Platonic tradition that was explicitly at odds with that of Marsilio Ficino—of whom in 1486, at any rate, Pico had an extremely low opinion as both a philosopher and Platonic commentator. In his own reading of the Platonic tradition, Pico relied heavily on post-Plotinian Greek scholastics (especially Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus) who had not yet been systematically discussed by Ficino; he also drew heavily on the

it is essential to understand Pico within the cultural framework of fifteenth-century Italy, instead of decontextualizing him by way of comparison with Enlightenment discourses or the self-understanding of modernity.

While earlier scholarship was especially interested in Pico either as an independent thinker or in his relation to Christianity and Platonism, recent studies have paid attention to the influence of Jewish learning that helped shaping Pico's positions on religion, philosophy, and history. To understand these influences, one has to take both Pico's reading and his personal environment into account.

1.1. *Flavius Mithridates and Pico's Kabbalistic Library*

Pico's private library was the largest of the time. The Count of Mirandola collected everything that seemed important for his own study, including Jewish mystical sources, an interest that was quite extraordinary in his time, because most Christian scholars and theologians neglected post-biblical Hebrew as inferior and unimportant. Not so Pico: in 1486 he asked Flavius Mithridates (alias Raimundo Moncada, a converted Jew of Sicilian provenance) to translate a whole kabbalistic library from Hebrew into Latin, comprising most of the Jewish mystical works available at the time. The enormous effort Mithridates invested into this work resulted in thousands of folio pages. After Pico's death in 1494, the manuscripts with the translations were stored in the Vatican Library in Rome, where they have remained almost forgotten until today.

After a first attempt by Pearle Kibre to describe the content of Pico's library, it was particularly Chaim Wirszubski who broke new ground in these matters. After his untimely death, scattered notes were published posthumously by the Israeli Academy of Sciences.[9] Despite the pioneering character of Wirszubski's research, it comes as no surprise that several of his conclusions regarding Pico turned out to be mistaken.[10]

Greek text of Plotinus's *Enneads*, which Pico thought that Ficino interpreted especially badly' (*Syncretism in the West*, 12).

[9] Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola*; Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*; see also Wirszubski, *Three Chapters in the History of Christian Kabbalah*; *A Christian Kabbalist Reads the Torah*; and *Between the Lines*.

[10] For instance, Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, 11, estimates a figure of 5,500 original pages, 3,500 of which are said to have survived; however, Busi, 'Introduction', 14 note 2, corrects this number to 1,500 original folios, i.e. 3,000 pages (see also Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysti-*

Consequently, in their preface to an ambitious new project that aims at retrieving Pico's whole kabbalistic library, Giulio Busi and Michele Ciliberto point out that what his library 'really preserves and how it is structured still remain unsettled questions'.[11] We know today that Pico was acquainted with the *Bahir*, the *Sefer Yetsirah*, the *Book of Roots*, the writings of Abraham Abulafia and Joseph Gikatilla (particularly the *Doors of Justice*), the influential *Commentary on the Torah* by R. Menahem ben Benjamin Recanati, and several other works. It may be assumed that he also knew the Zohar from extensive quotations.

Although Pico learned Hebrew and was able to grasp the basic meaning of the original sources,[12] his command of Hebrew did not equal that of Johannes Reuchlin or other philologists.[13] Hence, to a certain extent he was dependent on the translations that Flavius Mithridates prepared for him. 'In other words, without the ambiguous mediating figure of the Jewish apostate, the first chapter of the Christian kabbalah would have never been written'.[14]

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cism, 6, with a similar estimation). Busi notes 'that [Wirszubski's] book registers and discusses only half of the texts actually preserved in the manuscripts written for Pico. Furthermore, no notice is given about the lacunas. A scholar who consults the book is therefore unaware that he is relying on a largely incomplete image of Pico's kabbalistic readings, a fact that impairs any serious analysis of the sources and the thought of the great humanist' ('Introduction', 15).

[11] The first volume of this joint project of the *Institut für Judaistik* at the Free University of Berlin and the *Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento* in Florence was *The Great Parchment*, published in 2004 (the quotation is from Busi et al. [eds.], *The Great Parchment*, 5). See also Busi, 'Introduction'. In 2005 Pico's version of the *Sefer ha-Bahir* was published, a cornerstone of kabbalistic thinking that influenced Pico's philosophical ideas to an often underestimated extent; Pico explicitly mentions the *Bahir* in his *conclusiones*. Many new insights can be expected from this joint project; for details see www.mithridates.org (accessed 23 August 2006).

[12] Against the common view of his Christian contemporaries who took the Vulgate as the sacred book, Pico maintained that in fact Hebrew was the sacred language of the Christians (see Reichert, 'Pico della Mirandola and the Beginnings of Christian Kabbala', 198). Pico subscribed to Recanati's view that the Hebrew language had mystical and magical powers; see Farmer's comment on the respective *conclusio* 28.33 in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 359 (cf. also conclusions 28.47; 2>80; 3>55; 9>22 etc.). In an appendix to the *Heptaplus* and in an important letter, written on 10 November 1486—just before publication of the *conclusiones*—Pico argued that the Hebrew alphabet could not have changed since the time of Moses because otherwise the letters would have lost their magical power (see *Opera omnia*, 384–386); see also Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 142.

[13] Pico began to study Hebrew in the summer of 1486. In September he wrote to Ficino that although his Hebrew was still insufficient, he at least was now able to compose a simple letter in Hebrew ('[. . .] *in qua possum nondum quidem cum laude, sed citra culpam epistolam dictare*'; Pico della Miranola, *Opera omnia*, 367).

[14] Busi, 'Introduction', 17.

Flavius Mithridates is a fascinating, yet ambiguous, person.[15] On the one hand, he was a convert who contributed considerably to an anti-Jewish reading of kabbalistic texts—at times inserting slanderous commentaries in his translations. On the other hand, he was an extraordinarily good translator who was able to grasp even the slightest nuance of the complicated and multi-layered Hebrew texts. In this capacity, he can be ranked among the earliest philological experts in the field of fifteenth-century interreligious transfers, thus paving the way for subsequent generations of scholars, among them Guillaume Postel, Johannes Reuchlin, Knorr von Rosenroth, and Athanasius Kircher. Mithridates was well introduced in the Florentine intellectual milieu and a good friend not only of Pico but also of Ficino.

1.2. *Yohanan Alemanno*

Given the openness to embrace and use non-Christian mystical sources, we might ask if there were other persons involved in these circles, individuals who contributed with a genuine Jewish perspective (i.e. a view that was not filtered through the biased perception of a convert). In the last twenty years, a cornucopia of studies has revealed that there were indeed many such people. As particularly the research of Moshe Idel demonstrates, a crucial influence has to be attributed to Yohanan Alemanno and his circle.[16] This Jewish intellectual—if we want to apply that term to the Renaissance—lived for several years in Florence and was in contact with Pico and Flavius Mithridates. Alemanno was well acquainted with a broad variety of medieval texts, and was particularly well-read in the literature on astro-magical techniques, which he considered to be the summit of an ideal curriculum he composed. He even introduced Pico to an important philosophical-mystical treatise, the *Hayy*

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[15] On Mithridates see Starrabba, 'Ricerche storiche su Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada'; Carini, 'Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada'; Bauch, 'Flavius Wilhelmus Raimundus Mithridates'; Cassuto, 'Wer war der Orientalist Mithridates?'; Secret, 'Qui était l'orientaliste Mithridate?'; idem, 'Nouvelles precisions sur Flavius Mithridates'; Wirszubski, 'The Christological Sermon of Flavius Mithridates'; idem, 'Flavius Mithridates'; idem, *Three Chapters in the History of Christian Kabbalah*; Piemontese, 'Il Corano latino di Ficino'; Campanini, 'Pico Mirandulensis bibliotheca cabbalistica latina'; Scandaliato, 'Guglielmo Raimondo Moncada alias Flavio Mitridate'.

[16] On the relationship between Yohanan Alemanno and Pico see Idel, 'The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno'; idem, *Absorbing Perfections*, 487–492; Novak, 'Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno'; Lelli, *Yohanan Alemanno*; idem, 'Yohanan Alemanno, Pico della Mirandola e la cultura ebraica italiana del XV secolo'.

bin Yoqtan.[17] Concerning the famous last *conclusio* of Pico's 900 theses, quoted above, that 'as true astrology teaches us to read in the Book of God, so the kabbalah teaches us to read in the Book of Law', Moshe Idel has recently demonstrated that precisely this understanding of astrology and its relation to kabbalah can be traced back to Alemanno's writings. Alemanno's position is a response to contemporary and medieval Jewish debates about the 'Book of God' (*sifro shel ha-qadosh baruch hu'*), the hermeneutic component of astrology, and its relation to kabbalah as a different form of knowledge. This debate can be followed from R. Abraham ibn Ezra (twelfth century) to Nahmanides and R. Bahya ben Asher ibn Hallewa (thirteenth century) to R. Isaac Dieulosal and Alemanno.[18] With Alemanno being 'instrumental in teaching Pico about Bahya's interpretations of the concepts related to "book"', it is important to see that Pico, despite the innovative elements in his *conclusiones*, 'developed [. . .] a pattern of understanding Kabbalah in its relationship to astrology, in fact more to astromagic, that started its career much earlier in the Middle Ages, when the theosophical version of Kabbalah was conjugated to the astrological understanding of the Bible in Barcelona'.[19] Consequently, we would have to qualify Frances Yates' conception of Renaissance "occult philosophy" as something ingeniously new. 'By introducing astromagic of ultimately hermetic origins in Florence, Ficino was certainly not alone, nor was he the single or perhaps even the most important source for Pico's view on this topic'.[20]

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[17] See Idel, 'The Study Program of R. Yohanan Alemanno', 307 (with note 64); 313. In several studies, Stéphane Toussaint has explored the link between Alemanno's and Ficino's idea of magic on the one hand, and Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Zarza, on the other. 'Les liens possibles entre Ficin et le cabaliste Jochanan Alemanno se renforçaient en effet d'une nouvelle influence. A la lecture ficinienne d'Ibn Zarza s'ajoutait la présence insistante, passée elle aussi inaperçue, d'Ibn Tufayl et de Moshé Narboni dans plusieurs passages du *De vita coelitus comparanda*' (Toussant, 'Ficin, Pic de Mirandole, Reuchlin et le pouvoir des noms', 68; see also Toussaint, 'Ficino's Orphic Magic'). For a discussion of Franco Bacchelli's contributions to that issue (*Giovanni Pico e Pier Leone da Spoleto*) see Toussant, 'Ficin, Pic de Mirandole, Reuchlin et le pouvoir des noms', 67–69.

[18] Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, appendix 6 ('"Book of God"/"Book of Law" in Late-Fifteenth-Century Florence'), 482–492.

[19] Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 491. Similarly, Feldman notes: 'It is quite likely that the syncretic features of Pico's philosophy, especially its Platonistic and Qabbalistic elements, are due to Alemanno. Yet it needs to be noted that Pico's desire to learn Averroës from a Jew and his passion for Qabbalah were not sign of a growing rapprochement between Jews and Christians' (*Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, 164). I will come back to this question.

[20] Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 492. See also Klaassen, 'Medieval Ritual Magic in the Renaissance', who makes a similar case for Christian magic.

1.3. *Isaac Abarbanel*

Another person we have to take into account here is Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437–1508). Financier and courtier to the kings of Portugal, Spain, and Italy, Abarbanel was also a leading Jewish scholar at the turn of the sixteenth century. He was the foremost representative at these courts at the time of the 1492 expulsion of Jews from Spain, and during his time in Italy he had contact with leading thinkers, both Jewish and Christian. His influence on the intellectual debate on philosophy, astrology, messianism, and kabbalah was decisive.[21] Part of his oeuvre can be read as a response to proselyting attempts directed against Jews by Christians in Spain and Italy. After his arrival in Italy (1492), he quickly became acquainted with the newly translated Hermetic writings and observed the emergence of Christian readings of Jewish kabbalah, interpretations that usually had a missionizing subtext. He strongly refuted these attempts at "rewriting tradition", and wrote several works to convince Spanish *conversos* to return to their ancestral faith.[22] In his *Yeshu'ot meshiho*, Abarbanel directed his attention at the Christological interpretations of rabbinic sayings that were common in the *adversus Judaeos* literature.[23] Against what he regarded as Christian misinterpretations, he set his own influential messianic interpretation, which was informed by Islamic-Jewish astrological speculation regarding the so-called Great Conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn. Referring to Abraham bar Hiyya's twelfth-century messianic prognostication on the basis of Great Conjunctions, Abarbanel argued that with the seventh major conjunction in Pisces the nations' final downfall and the beginning of Israel's deliverance could be expected for 1503.[24]

Abarbanel's link to the Florentine intellectual circles was indirect. Having begun his Italian sojourn in Aragonese Naples, were he was

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[21] On Abarbanel, see Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*; Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition*; Borodowski, *Isaac Abravanel on Miracles, Creation, Prophecy, and Evil* (interestingly enough, Borodowski completely neglects astrology); Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*.

[22] See Ben-Shalom, 'The Converso as Subversive'; Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition*, 131.

[23] On this genre see Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*.

[24] Abarbanel, *Megillat ha-megalleh*, 112, 139–140; see Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition*, 130. For the messianism of the Jewish émigrés from the Spanish peninsula see Tishby, *Messianism in the Time of the Expulsion from Spain and Portugal*, *passim*; for the Jewish astrological tradition from Abraham bar Hiyya to Abraham ibn Ezra to Yosef ben Eliezer see Goldstein, 'Astronomy and Astrology in the Works of Abraham Ibn Ezra'; Rodríguez-Arribas, 'Historical Horoscopes of Israel'.

involved at court and had access to the Neapolitan royal library, he soon got into contact with Yohanan Alemanno and the Averroist Aristotelian Elija del Medigo.[25] Alemanno was the scholar-in-residence of the da Pisa family during the 1480s and early 1490s, which in turn held close contact with the Abarbanel family. Another link, of course, was Abarbanel's eldest son Judah, who was to become famous as Leone Ebreo. His *Dialoghi d'amore* (written around 1502) ranks among the most important Platonic treatises of the Renaissance; it also witnesses Hermetic and kabbalistic readings of esoteric tradition.[26] As Lawee points out, these Hermetic elements are already present in the Italian writings of Judah's father. 'Indeed, characteristic Alemanno adaptations of Renaissance ideas regarding magic, music, and King Solomon as the ideal Renaissance sage appear in Abarbanel's commentary on Kings, completed only a year after his arrival in Italy'.[27]

1.4. *Polemic and Counter-Polemic*

Flavius Mithridates, Yohanan Alemanno, Isaac Abarbanel, and others were part of an ongoing intellectual debate in fifteenth-century Italy; they were involved in what one might call a "kabbalistic discourse". But how, we may ask now, did these scholars react to the openly proselytizing attitude of Pico della Mirandola? The tendency for Christian

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[25] Like Alemanno, del Medigo (1463–1498), too, had personal contact with Pico della Mirandola. He was introduced to Abarbanel by Saul Hakohen as a 'wise and discerning man, perfect in philosophic investigation'; see Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition*, 45. It is believed that del Medigo lectured in philosophy at Padua, thus being 'the first Jew to have been an instructor in philosophy at a European university' (Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, 164). Del Medigo—described as Pico's 'tutor' by Seymour Feldman (ibid.)—met Pico in 1485 and discussed with him matters of Averroist and Aristotelian philosophy. In the introduction to his commentary on Averroës' *De substantia orbis* he praises Pico as '*homo valde intelligens, philosophus honorabilis, diligens viritatem, cui similem vere non vidi in hac aetate*' (*Expositio averrois de substantia orbis*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Ms Codex Vat. Lat. 4553, f. 1v, quoted from Hames, 'Elijah Delmedigo', 50; see ibid., 39). See also Kieszkowski, 'Les rapports entre Elie del Medigo et Pic de la Mirandole'; Bland, 'Elijah del Medigo's Averroist Response'; Hames, 'Elijah Delmedigo'.

[26] Although we should not forget that—as in the messianic writings of his father—Leone Ebreo was reluctant to substantiate his argumentation explicitly with kabbalistic doctrines (see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, 138–140), a close reading of the *Dialoghi d'amore* reveals formulations and ideas that are best explicable against a kabbalistic background. In one passage, Leone Ebreo even associates Platonism with the kabbalah (*The Philosophy of Love*, 296). A balanced interpretation is provided by Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis*, 166–175.

[27] Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition*, 45.

writers to use Jewish kabbalah in this way certainly already existed in the fourteenth century.[28] Pico, however, was the first to leave no doubt about his intentions. In addition to the sentences in *Heptaplus*, quoted above, we read in his fifth kabbalistic thesis: 'Every Hebrew kabbalist, following the principles and sayings of the science of the kabbalah, is inevitably forced to concede the Trinity and every divine Person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, without addition, omission, or variation, precisely as the Catholic faith of Christians states it'.[29]

Jewish scholars were well aware of the emerging Christian reading of their tradition and reacted strongly against it. Although there were Jewish kabbalists who were themselves influenced by this Christian critique and—albeit later—subscribed to a project of revealing a "trans-Jewish" *prisca theologia*,[30] the immediate reaction was negative. R. Elijah Menahem Halfan, a Rabbi and kabbalist in Venice, described the ongoing "expropriation" of Jewish kabbalah by Christian kabbalists in the first decades of the sixteenth century, and he linked this with the Lutheran schism.[31] The sternest reaction, however, came from outside of Italy, namely from Jewish kabbalists of the Ottoman Empire, most prominently from R. Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi in Jerusalem, and from R. Moses Cordovero who had never visited Italy but was acquainted with the discussion, probably from his Italian disciple R. Mordekhai Dato.[32] Not surprisingly, it was particularly the Christological reading

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[28] One can as examples adduce two converts who were well acquainted with kabbalah: R. Abner of Burgos (fourteenth century) who became Alfonso de Valadolid, and Paulus de Heredia (fifteenth century); see Idel, 'Jewish Thinkers versus Christian Kabbalah', 51 (with references). On Christian Hebraism in the twelfth century, see Signer, 'Polemic and Exegesis'.

[29] '*Quilibet Hebræus Cabalista secundū principia & dicta scientiae Cabalæ, cogitur ineuitabiliter cōcedere de trinitate & qualibet persona diuina, patre, filio, & spiritu sancto illud præcise sine additione, diminutione aut uariatione, quod ponit fides catholica Christianorum*' (Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, 108); see Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 523.

[30] R. Elija del Medigo criticized the Jewish Kabbalah, maybe due to his encounter with Pico; see Idel, 'The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance', 201; Hames, 'Elija Delmedigo', 39. Later, as Moshe Idel notes, 'the Jewish Kabbalist became more open to the idea of an exoteric Kabbalah, a Jewish version of the *prisca theologia*, as the result of their contacts with the Christian contemporaries but at the same time they printed their original texts *inter alia* also in order to counteract the Christological interpretations of the Jewish lore' (Idel, 'Jewish Thinkers versus Christian Kabbalah', 58). On the rhetorics of (superior) "tradition" see also von Stuckrad, 'Whose Tradition?'.

[31] Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 462; idem, 'Jewish Thinkers versus Christian Kabbalah', 53–54.

[32] See the overview in Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 461–469; idem, 'Jewish Thinkers versus Christian Kabbalah', 53–57.

of Jewish sources—the interpretation of the Tetragrammaton and the identification of Jesus with one of the sefirot—that triggered the fierce reaction of Jewish kabbalists.[33]

At this point, the question arises how we, as scholars of religion, can come to grips with this exchange of polemic and counter-polemic. Taking a more theoretical stance, I will argue that we should avoid two things: we should neither apply simple moralistic evaluations here, such as "anti-Jewish" or "anti-Semitic",[34] nor should we consider only one side of the complex debate. Without taking into consideration the ongoing and continuous development of "Jewish kabbalah" we will never fully understand "Christian kabbalah". In other words, it is important to avoid a tendency that considers "Jewish kabbalah" as a mere "forerunner" (both in time and substance),[35] without taking into account that both sides were engaged in an ongoing debate, with mutual references and influences. Since we are dealing with identities that are negotiated in direct reference to the "other",[36] it seems more appropriate to apply a model that integrates these contributions in a dynamic network of conflicting ideologies.

2. *Pluralistic Networks and the Kabbalah: New Approaches*

Steven M. Wasserstrom has introduced an illuminating term in order to understand the dynamic networks between Jewish and Muslim scholars

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[33] This criticism was hurled against Reuchlin's works, as well, despite the "philosemitic" attitude of the latter. On Reuchlin, see the summary of Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Johannes Reuchlin und die Anfänge der christlichen Kabbalah'; cf. Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, 169–177, who notes that 'Kabbalah filled the gap left by scholasticism' (p. 170) and thus was particularly attractive for Jewish and Christian Neoplatonists.

[34] Having said this, I do not deny that anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic tendencies were elements of the discourse. I agree with Allison P. Coudert that 'the line between impersonal, rational, and religiously motivated anti-Judaism and irrational, racially motivated antisemitism is virtually impossible to maintain in the medieval and early modern periods. I would go further and argue that antisemitism is and always has been a potential aspect of Christianity from its inception' (Coudert, 'Seventeenth-Century Christian Hebraists', 44). What I am arguing is that we have to differentiate between the moral judgments made by twentieth-century scholars, and the polemics and counter-polemics that took place in early modern Europe.

[35] See also Boaz Huss' contribution to the present volume.

[36] On the process of "othering", see Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, 1–3. He notes: 'The history of the Jews of Italy in the Renaissance is the history of the encounter between a minority determined to perpetuate its Otherness and a majority equally bent on its assimilation' (p. 3). See also Silberstein, 'Others Within and Others Without'.

in medieval Andalusia. He talks of 'interconfessional circles' that made possible an intensive exchange of thoughts between those two groups, an exchange that was fostered not least by the fact that both groups shared a common enemy—Christianity. This concept should not be confused with moralistic ideas about a "dialogue between the religions", since Wasserstrom notes that these intellectuals were 'interconfessional despite themselves': they were not necessarily interested in understanding and respecting the other tradition, but were engaged in polemical dissociation. The traditions of the competing party were presented as if they were one's own, hence rhetorics of "expropriation" were a common strategy. What drove these circles together—often in direct and friendly contact—was a field of shared interest. 'Specifically, it was through the shared passion for certain intellectual subsystems—Sufi, Ishmāʿīlī, Ishrāqi, Kabbalistic—that intercourse between Spanish Jews and Muslims flourished'.[37] Although Wasserstrom restricts this characteristic to the specific Andalusian situation of the Middle Ages, I would argue that the notion of "interconfessional circles"—or, because "interconfessional" is an anachronism, of "interreligious circles"—also applies to the situation of Renaissance culture. What we see in the intense exchange of thoughts and positions between Pico and other Christian kabbalists on the one hand and their Jewish contemporaries on the other, is exactly this shared passion for certain models of interpretation. These passions fostered religious and philosophical identities. It was the discourse of the day. And just as in the medieval case, the driving force behind this exchange was not dialogue but polemical dissociation and competition.

The ongoing debate between Jewish and Christian scholars in the fifteenth century was an overture to the humanist "Republic of Letters":

> In fact, [. . .] as Kristeller and many others have taught us, scholars rarely lived, and never worked, alone. They renewed the traditionally monastic customs and usages of academic life. And they created new forms of intellectual sociability and new academic institutions. Learned groups and societies, formal and informal, took shape, first in individual Italian and German cities and then across Europe. Eventually, scholars came to speak a republican language of their own. They represented themselves as citizens of a formal, international community, the Republic of Letters. Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even as religious polemic

[37] Wasserstrom, 'Jewish-Muslim Relations in the Context of Andalusian Emigration', 69.

> and warfare shook the world around them, they tried to set standards of intellectual interaction, to regulate one another's way of pursuing learning, and to sustain an ideal of learned conversation that transcended the narrow loyalties of nation and church.[38]

In addition to Wasserstrom's and Grafton's analyses, reference must be made to Robert Bonfil's reassessment of the complex relationship between Jewish and Christian culture in Renaissance Italy. Far from being isolated, Italian Jews elaborated their identity in direct confrontation with their Christian contemporaries. Bonfil sees a few specific traits in this development: 'the sensitivity of Jewish culture to some of the forms and contents of Christian culture; the existence of a cultural relationship between Jews and Christians on the personal level as well as on the level of the learning they shared; and the selective adoption of forms and contents imported from outside as integral expressions of Jewish identity'.[39] The latter could mean emulation or sincere opposition to Christian society. Bonfil then asks:

> Why should one interpret this kind of participation in the mentality and general tendencies of the time as assimilation pure and simple? Why not see it as Jews' way of simply being men of their time? Or again, why claim that the Jews were influenced by the Renaissance, whereas Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, or Cosimo de' Medici were its typical representatives? Why not say that Messer Leon, Elijah del Medigo, or Johannan Alemanno were just as much men of the Renaissance as their Christian contemporaries? In my opinion, this approach renders a better service to the general understanding of the Renaissance and of the mentality of its exponents than do current theories.[40]

In the same vein, Moshe Idel has argued for a much more complex picture of Renaissance kabbalah than presented in the bulk of the scholarly literature. Comparing the kabbalistic centers in Safed and Italy, he points out that due to the preconceived attitudes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars, the manifold relationships and exchanges between those centers have been insufficiently studied. Pico was not

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[38] Grafton, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 13. Grafton correctly emphasizes that '[a]nyone who hopes to grapple with Renaissance humanism or seventeenth-century historical scholarship [. . .] must engage with the lives and thoughts of its later interpreters as well' (p. 15). The same is true for the scholars and interpreters of the history of kabbalah, as the present volume reveals.

[39] Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, 168.

[40] Ibid. See also Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*; idem, 'Aliens Within: The Jews and Antijudaism'.

alone in his desire to discuss his *conclusiones* with the pope; Abraham Abulafia and Solomon Molkho, too, sought an audience with the leader of Christendom. The personal contacts between Christians, Jews, and Muslims—Safed was part of the Ottoman Empire, and Sufi masters were living in Safed—were an important element of exchange and transport of ideas, and need to be moved into the center of scrutiny. Therefore, 'the main topics in the early Florentine Renaissance might have been influenced by Jewish and Judeo-Arabic texts available in Florence'.[41]

Wasserstrom's, Bonfil's, and Idel's analyses lend themselves quite naturally to a combination with discursive and field-theoretical approaches to the history of religions. In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline one way of achieving such an integration of scholarly perspectives. I will conceptualize the "circles" as networks, in which discursive transfers take place, and the "intellectual subsystems" as fields of discourse.

2.1. *Pluralism and European History of Religions*

The last decade has seen a new interest in describing the history of religions in Europe from the perspective of religious pluralism. Quite against the common assumption that European history of religion is the history of Christianity and its confessional schisms,[42] scholars of religion have begun to focus on the specific dynamics of interreligious dependence as a common denominator of European culture. Religious pluralism has been a characteristic of European history ever since ancient times, and is not, as often thought, a characteristic feature only of modernity.[43] It is the presence of alternatives that has shaped western culture.

It is important to note, however, that from a perspective of cultural studies this interlacing does not apply to religious systems alone. In two seminal articles, Burkhard Gladigow has argued that it is the mutual dependence of religious, philosophical, scientific, and political reflections that characterize "European history of religions" (*Europäische Religionsgeschichte* with an upper-case "E", in contrast to "history of

[41] Idel, *Italy in Safed, Safed in Italy*, 244. See also Idel, 'Jewish Mystical Thought in the Florence of Lorenzo il Magnifico'; Toussaint, 'Ficino's Orphic Magic'.

[42] For a deconstruction of the grand narrative of the 'Christian Occident' see, for instance, Perkins, *Christendom and European Identity*.

[43] See Kippenberg & von Stuckrad, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, 126–135.

religions in Europe").[44] Based on what I call the *two-fold pluralism of European history of religion*, we can formulate three assumptions that are essential for this approach: (a) religious pluralism and the existence of alternatives are the normal case, rather than the exception, in western cultural history; (b) western culture has always been characterized by a critical reflection on religious truth claims and the interaction between different cultural systems (such as religion, science, art, literature, politics, law, economics, etc.); (c) the existence of competing ways of attaining knowledge of the world is a key to understanding the role of esotericism in western discourse.[45]

2.2. *A Kabbalistic Field of Discourse*

Because of their often vague usage, the concepts "discourse"[46] and "field" are in need of some explanation. I apply "discourse" in the way Michel Foucault and others have described it, i.e. as the totality of certain thought-systems that interact with societal systems in manifold ways. "Discursive formations" conceptualize the impact of and mutual dependency between systems of interpreting the world and processes of institutionalization and materialization. Talking of "discursive events" elucidates the fact that discourses are themselves *practices* that influence

[44] 'Zum einen ist die Europäische Religionsgeschichte spätestens seit der Renaissance über einen neuen Modus der Professionalisierung von Religion definierbar, der nun Epochengliederungen, Historisierungen und philologische Arbeit auch an religiösen Texten außerhalb der christlichen Tradition erprobt. Auf diese Weise wird, zum anderen, ein Vorlauf für eine Pluralisierung des religiösen Feldes erprobt, die noch mit den christlichen Ansprüchen kompatibel erscheint, zugleich aber alte und fremde Religionen mit einbezieht. Mit der Renaissance wird schließlich eine Dichte intellektueller Kommunikation in Europa erreicht, in deren Rahmen nicht nur bildende Kunst, Musik und Literatur "flächendeckend" verbreitet werden, sondern auch neue religiöse Entwürfe und Einstellungen. Ein Renaissancefürst, der sich den Ankauf und die schnelle Übersetzung des Corpus Hermeticum angelegen sein lässt—später kanonischer Text für religiöse Strömungen in den unterschiedlichsten Disziplinen—mag als Charakteristikum einer neuen Phase religiöser Optionen in Europa angesehen werden. Nicht nur die "positiven", institutionalisierten Religionen erfahren die geschuldete Aufmerksamkeit, sondern auch "Unterströmungen", verdrängte Muster, "Häresien", "Alternativen", die explizit oder implizit mit dem Christentum konkurrieren können' (Gladigow, 'Europäische Religionsgeschichte seit der Renaissance', paragraph 1). This article extends and accentuates the argument of his earlier article 'Europäische Religionsgeschichte', published in 1995.

[45] This is also the guiding idea of my forthcoming study *Locations of Knowledge*, which puts the study of western esotericism in the interpretational framework of a two-fold pluralism.

[46] Engler, 'Discourse', provides a very good overview.

non-discursive elements.[47] Discursive relations are always *power relations*, which means that the term "discourse" refers not only to contents of frameworks of meaning, but also to instruments of power.[48] With regard to the concept of "fields", the term is borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu who defined it as the totality of positions that people adopt in their mutual relations. Hence, a field is not an object but a structure of relations that is in constant change and motion.[49] With Burkhard Gladigow we can conclude: 'Cooperation and complementarity, polemic and dialogue, exclusion and inclusion of systems and among the carriers of these systems should best be described as a "field"'.[50]

If we apply these analytical tools to our initial question of Pico's kabbalistic polemic, we will see that the Count of Mirandola was involved in a complex negotiation of identities. Since discourses are not only systems of thought, but can be described as the social organization of tradition, meaning, and matters of knowledge, the kabbalistic field of discourse consists of competing strategies of argumentation, brought in by representatives of different religious and philosophical milieus. Only if we explain the "polyfocality" of this shifting field of identities, i.e. by taking into account the contributions from various points of view and religious backgrounds, we will arrive at a better understanding of the complex dynamics of this "discursive formation". And what

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[47] Foucault repeatedly exemplified this with the emergence of hospitals (particularly for mentally "ill" people) as the materialization of certain ideas about the body, the human being, and illness. Max Weber's demonstration of the interference between a Protestant inner-worldly asceticism and the emergence of capitalism is also a discourse. Finally, as an example closer to the theme of this chapter, we could refer to the institution of "Talmud disputations" as expression of an anti-Jewish discourse. The printing and distribution of books likewise reflects discursive events.

[48] Still the best introduction to Foucault's concept of discourse is Foucault's inaugural address of 1970, *L'ordre du discours*. Programmatically he states: '[J]e suppose que dans toute société la production du discours est à la fois contrôlée, sélectionnée, organisée et redistribuée par un certain nombre de procédures qui ont pour rôle d'en conjurer les pouvoirs et les dangers, d'en maîtriser l'événement aléatoire, d'en esquiver la lourde, la redoutable matérialité. Dans une société comme la nôtre, on connaît, bien sûr, les procédures d'*exclusions*. La plus évidente, la plus familière aussi, c'est l'*interdit*. [. . .] [E]t puisque—cela, l'histoire ne cesse de nous l'enseigner—le discours n'est pas simplement ce qui traduit les luttes ou les systèmes de domination, mais ce pour quoi, ce par quoi on lutte, le pouvoir dont on cherche à s'emparer' (Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*, 10–12). Wouter J. Hanegraaff has used this concept, with special regard to the strategy of *excluding* and *forbidding*, as a way to describe esotericism; see Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge', 228.

[49] See Bourdieu's masterpiece, 'Genèse et structure du champ religieux'.

[50] Gladigow, 'Europäische Religionsgeschichte', 28; cf. also Mörth, *Die gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit von Religion*, as a field-theory that differs from Boudieu's and Gladigow's.

is more: we have to acknowledge both the personal relations between the actors on these fields[51] and what can be called the material aspect of knowledge.[52]

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries witnessed a new step in the formation of a kabbalistic discourse. Religiously and philosophically, alternative readings of cosmos and history were openly discussed and made their way into interreligious tensions. Materially, two things happened: on the one hand—by way of translations and printings of books—kabbalah was popularized and scholarly debates became a public issue; on the other hand, esoteric claims of knowledge were institutionalized in "academies", "societies", or intellectual networks.[53] The attempts by the Church to apply instruments of power to control kabbalistic discourse—against which, of course, the position of Jewish scholars was weak—likewise influenced the field of kabbalistic speculation.

Pico della Mirandola may not be a "symbol of his age". His life and writings, however, stand out as telling examples of shifting identities in a climate of inter- and intra-religious transfers, dissociations, and stimulations.

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[51] For the fact that scholars today are also players on fields of discourse, see von Stuckrad, 'Discursive Study of Religion'.

[52] On the "material aspects" of this polemical discourse of power, see also Raz-Krakotzkin, 'Censorship, Editing, and the Reshaping of Jewish Identity'.

[53] Examples are the "Platonic Academy" in Florence or the Rosicrucian movement.

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CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY AND JEWISH KABBALAH: RUSSIAN MYSTICS IN THE SEARCH FOR PERENNIAL WISDOM*

Konstantin Burmistrov

1. *The Eighteenth Century and Russian Freemasonry: An Introduction*

In Russia, the eighteenth century was an age of deep social, cultural, and religious crisis. It was the age when all the most essential trends in Russian society emerged: ideals of liberalism, free-thinking, secularism, as well as the ideas of religious reform, but also of traditionalism and conservatism. These ideological positions largely determined the evolution of Russian society over the next two centuries. Since the middle of that century a Russian philosophical school had begun to develop, and different mystical sects and heterodox religious movements appeared throughout the country. Finally, the second half of the eighteenth century was an epoch when freemasonry permeated the whole of Russian society and gave rise to a Russian intelligentsia—i.e. the leading social force of subsequent Russian history.[1]

These were hard times for the Russian Orthodox Church. Peter the Great deprived the Church of its autonomy, reducing it to just one public institution among others, and essentially curtailed the privileges of clergy and cloisters. All religious books were subjected to strict censorship. On the whole, Russian theological thought suffered a deep intellectual decline. The historian of Russian theology George Florovsky calls this period 'the Babylonian captivity of the Russian Church', when 'religious consciousness very often shrank, contracted,

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[1] See a detailed description of the state of Russian society in the eighteenth century in Smith, *Working the Rough Stone*, 53–90.

sought shelter in silence and a concealment of problems'.[2] The process of secularization resulted in a gradual 'exclusion of the Church from [social] life' and culture.[3]

Russian Masons found themselves in a state of double opposition. On the one hand, they opposed the agnostic free-thinkers and rejected Voltaireanism—and on this point they took the side of the Church. Encouraged by the "enlightened" Empress Catherine II, Russian Voltaireans sought to elaborate a new morality based on reason rather than on Christian ethics.[4] Some prominent Masonic authors, who at first were Voltaire enthusiasts, later broke away from his views and wrote angrily against them.[5] On the other hand, they were—albeit less visibly so—profoundly opposed to official theological doctrine. In the words of an authoritative historian of the Russian Church, A. Dobroklonsky, 'though they [i.e. Russian Masons] were not in an overt opposition to the Orthodox Church, and, quite the contrary, praised its doctrines and ceremonies, their own teaching strongly disagreed with the Orthodoxy'.[6] Masons objected to, what in their opinion constituted simplistic interpretations of the Scriptures, blind faith in church rites and ceremonies, and so forth, and called for a return to the traditions of enlightened Byzantine Christianity. The first Russian translations of patristic literature were published by Russian Masons in the last third of the eighteenth century—including the works of Augustine of Hippo, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Macarius of Egypt, Clement of Rome, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Some authoritative figures of the Russian Church, who were responsible for the development of Orthodox theological thought in the first half of the nineteenth century, were educated at institutions established and managed by Masons. Masonic doctrine, symbolism, and even vocabulary left an explicit mark on the works and homiletics of some prominent Church hierarchs, including Michael Desnitsky (1761–1824), the

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[2] Florovsky, *Paths of Russian Theology*, 89, 103–104.

[3] Zenkovsky, *The History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 1, 82.

[4] On the Russian Voltairean movement, see Mikhailov & Stroiev (eds.), *Voltaire and Russia*; Karp, *French Enlighteners and Russia*.

[5] On the critical attitude to Voltaireanism in Russian freemasonry, see Burmistrov & Endel, 'The Place of Kabbalah in the Doctrine of Russian Freemasons', 29; Vernadsky, *Russian Masonry in the Reign of Catherine the Great*, 158, 263, etc.

[6] Dobroklonsky, *Textbook on the History of Russian Church*, 664. It is symptomatic that this Orthodox historian includes his section on Russian Masons in a chapter with the title 'False Doctrines'.

metropolitan of St. Petersburg. Thus, Masonic activity and doctrines exercised a significant effect on the later life of the Russian Orthodox Church and its flock.

1.1. *The Orthodox Church and Masonic Tradition*

According to Masonic doctrine, man is the center of the created world; he is to play the leading role in the process of its transformation and preparation for the salvation which is to come. In the words of Nikolai Novikov (1744–1818),

> It is clear that God created us and supported us to reveal through us His Majesty, Power, and Wisdom. We are the work of God, and the work exalts its Maker. And inasmuch as we are the most perfect among the creatures, which could have been created instead of us [. . .] we were endowed with the most venerable and preferential form in the universe.[7]

This concept of man as a powerful theurgist, typical of the Renaissance, was combined with and somewhat restrained by the principles of Orthodox piety. Russian Masons sought salvation within the Church, but the boundaries of *their* Church did not coincide with the limits of the official Russian Church. They dreamed of an ancient, "interior" mystical church, which was established by God Himself in the days of old.[8] Explaining the structure and characteristics of this "interior" church, as opposed to the mundane church created by the people, Russian Masons—by which I principally mean Russian Rosicrucians and the members of the so-called Theoretical Degree of the Solomon Sciences—appealed not only to the rich traditions of eastern and western Christian mysticism, but also to various esoteric currents, such as Hermeticism, Neognosticism, Jewish and Christian kabbalah.

The *Weltanschauung* of Russian "theoretical" Masons and Rosicrucians was very complex and combined elements from various esoteric traditions, philosophical ideas, and religious systems. As was noted above, in the second half of the eighteenth century Russian society underwent a deep transformation under the influence of a whole series of ideas

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[7] Novikov, 'On the Dignity of Man in His Relation to God and the World', cit. after: Novikov, *Freemasonry and Russian Culture*, 121. All translations of texts other than English are mine, if not noted otherwise.

[8] See, e.g., Lopukhin's *Some Characteristics of the Interior Church* (St. Petersburg 1798, Russian; French translation: *Quelques traits de l'Eglise intérieure*, St. Petersburg 1798). On this basic concept of Russian Masonic doctrine see Danilov, *Iwan Lopuchin*, 191–254.

brought from Europe, and thereby came into conflict with traditional Orthodox values. This conflict profoundly affected Russian freemasonry. As a rule, Russian Rosicrucians remained conservative Orthodox Christians—some of them even observed church rules and prescriptions more rigidly than many Orthodox priests and the majority of the congregation, although they at the same time might appreciate Catholic and Protestant mysticism, theosophy, Sophiology, and even Jewish kabbalah and its Christian interpretations. The forming of Masonic ideology was a long and complex process entailing an inner polemic in the Masonic milieu. An incessant search for a unity in different esoteric doctrines on the basis of the Renaissance concept of *perennial wisdom* allowed them to estimate other traditions highly and to discover anew the hidden aspects of their own religion.

It seems reasonable to assume that the very concept of "tradition" was understood by the Masons in terms of their interest in kabbalah, given that this Hebrew term means, strictly speaking, "an [esoteric] tradition". As Steven M. Wasserstrom puts it, the common use of the term "tradition" in the modern history of religion (in the works of such writers as Scholem and Eliade) was probably derived from the Christian kabbalah.[9] One might suggest, however, that the concept of "tradition", which is so important in Masonic doctrine, had the same origin. Of course, Russian brethren were well acquainted with the notion of the "church tradition" (Lat. *sacra traditio*, Rus. *predaniye*)—one of two prime sources of Christian faith (along with the Bible), comprising 'oral instructions of Jesus and apostles and a chain of commentaries and exegetical works of the church fathers as well as the acts of councils and other documents of the Church'.[10] However, the Masons significantly broadened the meaning of this concept: for them, elements of the true and pristine tradition could be found in almost every religion, esoteric or philosophical school, and in the ancient scriptures, but only the Jewish kabbalah preserved these elements in their most accurate and unaltered form.

In many Masonic texts an attempt is made to describe the chain of transmission of this ancient kabbalistic tradition. According to the anonymous author of an article entitled 'On the Science Named Kab-

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[9] Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*, 39–41. Cf. also Scholem's letter to S. Lehmann (1916), where Scholem discussed the problem of tradition: Scholem, *Briefe I*, 46–48.

[10] Averintsev, *Christianity: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 383.

balah', which was published in 1785 in the Russian Masonic magazine *The Resting Laborious Man*,

> The word "kabbalah" is derived from the Hebrew word "kabal" ("to receive"); for the Jews say that several men, seventy-two in number, who were endowed with a particle of the spirit of Moses, received from Moses the esoteric knowledge of the divine law, and taught it to their descendants orally and not in written form [. . .]. The kabbalists, who are considered among the philosophers, assert that no science except kabbalah can be named philosophy in the strict sense, and that masters in kabbalah were distinguished in all nations. From here took their origin the Chaldeans in Assyria, the Magi in Persia, the Hierophants in Egypt, the Brahmans and Hymnosophists in India, the Druids in Gaul, the Sages and Philosophers in Greece [. . .]. The origin and tradition of the Kabbalistic Lore is attributed to Ezra who is said to have given back to us sacred books that were once lost, by means of the Lore.[11]

This idea of an ancient secret tradition certainly reminds us of the concept of *prisca theologia* which was so popular in Europe from the Renaissance onwards.[12] It is not surprising that some Masons traced the origin of the Craft back, not to the holy tradition of the Church, but to that ancient "kabbalah" considered as the purest and most complete expression of the primeval and genuine *prisca theologia*, which sprang from the days of Adam and Moses and had endured, to a lesser or greater degree, in all religions and metaphysical systems. In some texts they plainly acknowledged a Jewish origin for the Masonic Brotherhood. Thus, according to a short treatise called *A Letter of the Rabbi of Lisbon to the Rabbi of Brest*, which was allegedly written in Hebrew, but in fact was composed in 1817 by a Polish Mason, Prince Michal Dluski,[13] modern European freemasonry descended from an ancient "Society of Righteous Men" which had been established among the people of Israel by the will of God just after the Babylonian captivity.[14] Nehemiah,

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[11] (Anon.), 'On the Science Named Kabbalah', 94–96.

[12] See Schmitt, 'Perennial Philosophy', 505–532; Walker, *The Ancient Theology*; Faivre, 'Renaissance Hermeticism and the Concept of Western Esotericism', 109–123; Idel, 'Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino and in Some Jewish Treatments', 137–158.

[13] Prince Michael S. Dluski (Michał Dłuski, 1760–1821), prelate, was one of the most active and respected Masons of the Russian Empire; he joined the Craft in 1785, was a member, an honorary member, and master of about ten lodges in Wilno, Warszawa, and St. Petersburg, including "Amis Réunis". See Serkov, *Russian Masonry, 1731–2000*, 302.

[14] See: [Dluski], *List Rabina Lizbonskiego do Rabina Brzeskiego z dyalektu rabinsko-talmudycznego przetłumaczony* (8 pp.); in Russian: *Pis'mo ravvina Lissabonskogo k ravvinu Brzhestskomu, perevedennoe s dialekta Ravvinsko-Talmudicheskogo*, in the Division of Manuscripts of the

Zerubbabel, Seraiah, and some other "elders of Israel" were among its founders.[15] Jesus Christ also belonged to this secret brotherhood:

> In a small treatise which was published, as it is said, by the learned doctor Gamaliel in the reign of Herod of Edom,[16] I find that the well-known Jesus of Nazareth, who was condemned to crucifixion by our people, and whose teaching spread throughout the world, was a member of this righteous Society, and that he further improved its perfect principles [. . .]. This doctrine of surpassing morality became the basic law of the society *Hofshim Gaderim*,[17] which obeys the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and does not interfere in any dogmatic controversies, and therefore wins respect and praise on every side.[18]

Thus, according to this version of Masonic history, the Craft is a link in the chain of transmission of a primordial tradition, i.e. kabbalah, and Jesus was one of the prominent masters of this tradition. That is probably the reason why Russian Masons considered it legitimate and natural for Christians to study Jewish esoteric doctrines.

1.2. *Kabbalah and Russian Mysticism*

Russian Masons esteemed kabbalah as an ancient tradition that preserved invaluable grains of pristine wisdom, true knowledge which had been granted to mankind through revelation in days of yore. Kabbalah, together with magic and alchemy, became an integral part of the Masonic doctrine.[19] Moreover, kabbalistic concepts of universal mankind (*Adam Kadmon*) and global improvement (*tiqqun ha-olam*) might

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Russian State Library (DMS RSL), F. 147, N 287 (two copies). See also a lengthy refutation of this pamphlet written by Jędrzej Pohl: Pohl, *Prosta odpowiedź prostego chrzescianina wiernego jednak na niewerne Pismo zydowskie* (78 pp.).

[15] See Neh 12.

[16] Of course, this passage should read "Herod of Judea". Rabban Gamliel the Elder (first century CE) is regarded as one of the greatest teachers in the history of Judaism. His legal ordinances are quoted in the Mishnah. Gamliel probably had a liberal attitude to Christianity. He is mentioned kindly in the Book of Acts (5:34–40), and the apostle Paul is said to study 'at the feet of Gamaliel and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers' (Acts 22:3).

[17] Heb. "freemasons". Modern Hebrew has another term for the Masons: *Bonim hofshim*.

[18] DMS RSL, F. 147, N 287, f. 33v–34; [Dluski], *List Rabina Lizbonskiego do Rabina Brzeskiego*, 6–7.

[19] On the status of kabbalah in Western European freemasonry and secret societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma*, 201–210; idem, 'Was hat der *Chevalier de la Cabale* mit der Kabbala zu tun?', 151–166.

have served as an ideological basis for the Masonic program of radical reformation of social, political, moral and religious life in Russia.[20]

As has been noted, Russian Masons exploited some kabbalistic concepts in order to polemicize both against Voltaireanism and materialism, and against the stagnant theology of the official Russian Church. It is known that the influence that freemasonry exerted on Russian society did not cease after its official prohibition in 1822. Masonic doctrines, including those which were inspired by such kabbalistic ideas as *Ein-Sof* and sefirot, *Adam Kadmon*, symbols and sacred language, kept on playing a significant role in Russian Romantic literature of the first half of the nineteenth century (S. Bobrov, V. Odoyevski, A. Veltman, N. Gogol, etc.).[21] Even more important was the influence of Masonic ideology on the development of Russian Romantic philosophy and social utopianism in the first half of the nineteenth century as well as of the Slavophile movement.[22] As a component of the Masonic outlook, kabbalah thus became an important factor in Russian history and culture. The most important revival of Masonic ideas, however, took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Russian religious philosophy of the so-called "Silver Age".[23] Russian philosophers and theologians of that period—Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900), Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), and Nikolai Berdiayev (1874–1948)—did not belong to any Masonic lodges or secret societies, but many of their ideas and pursuits were almost identical with those of Russian Masons of the late eighteenth century. Although living in a quite different historical situation, Russian religious thinkers of the "Silver Age" found themselves in the same double opposition as Ivan Elagin (1725–1793) and Nikolai Novikov did in their time. They

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[20] See Burmistrov & Endel, 'Kabbalah in Russian Masonry', 9–59; Burmistrov & Endel, 'The Place of Kabbalah in the Doctrine of Russian Freemasons'. A. V. Danilov in his book on I. Lopukhin mentions kabbalah as an important source of Lopukhin's views, but sometimes Danilov seems to confuse Jewish mysticism with Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and various European esoteric traditions; see: Danilov, *Iwan Lopuchin*, 123–180.

[21] See, on the Masonic-theosophical background of the Russian Romantic literature, Weiskopf, *Gogol's Subject*. See also Baehr, 'The Masonic Component in Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature', 121–39; idem, *The Paradise Myth in 18th Century Russia*.

[22] See Sakulin, *From the History of Russian Idealism*, vol. 1:1, 326–616, vol. 1:2, 1–278; Fedorov, *The European Mystical Tradition and Russian Philosophical Thought*; Pustarnakov (ed.), *Schelling's Philosophy in Russia*.

[23] Burmistrov, 'Vladimir Soloviev and Kabbalah: A preliminary analysis', 7–104; idem, 'Kabbalah in Russian Philosophy in the late 19th–early 20th century', 37–70.

struggled against positivism, materialism, and atheism—and against the dogmatism of the Church. They also considered themselves reformers of the Orthodox Church, and they managed to rouse up public conscience and stimulate new creative forces in Russian Orthodox theology.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how Russian religious thinkers exploited kabbalistic concepts, while elaborating some topics which they felt were rather poorly developed in Orthodox theological thought. In doing so they contributed—either expressly or by implication—to the inner polemic between "mystics" and "scholastics" that had been a recurrent feature of the Russian Church since the middle ages and which had become especially sharp from the late eighteenth century onward. First, I will analyze their conceptions of creation and their heterodox understanding of the Trinity, as well as the relationship between its hypostases and the nature of Jesus Christ. Thereafter, I will discuss their interpretation of language, an understanding of the nature of words and names which was probably inspired by kabbalistic concepts.

2. *Ein-Sof, the Infinite and Indescribable God*

In kabbalah, Ein-Sof (Heb. "Infinite") is understood as a concealed and absolutely inconceivable God having no attributes. Ein-Sof is the absolute perfection in which there are no distinctions and no differentiations; according to Scholem, one can define Ein-Sof as the 'negation of any negations'.[24] Only through the finite nature of every existing thing, through the actual existence of creation itself, it is possible to deduce the existence of Ein-Sof as the first infinite cause.[25]

Christian kabbalists also considered Ein-Sof to be an ineffable and absolutely incomprehensible, concealed God, a *Deus absconditus*.[26] This idea is clearly expressed by Johannes Reuchlin:

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[24] Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 38.

[25] Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 89. On the different interpretation of Ein-Sof in kabbalah, see ibid., 88–96; idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 265–289, 431–444; Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, 121–125.

[26] The Christian apophatic tradition of "negative theology", however, also left a mark on their interpretations of kabbalah. Thus, Johannes Reuchlin referred to Nicholas of Cusa when discussing the inscrutability of Ein-Sof, and Flavius Mithridates—the mentor of Pico in kabbalah—combined the apophatic formulae of R. Azriel of Gerona with those of the Christian Neoplatonist Johannes Scotus Eriugena. See Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 100–105. See also Kocku von Stuckrad's contribution to the present volume.

> Ein-Sof, Infinity [. . .] is unknowable and unutterable, hidden away in the furthest recesses of his divinity, into the unreachable abyss of the fountain of light, so thus nothing is understood to come from him [. . .]. He is being and non-being—all that to our rational minds seems contrary and self-contradictory. He is like a being apart, untrammelled oneness, uncomplicatedly binding all together.[27]

Christian authors borrowed from kabbalah the concept of sefirot emanating from Ein-Sof, and identified three higher sefirot—Keter, Chochmah, and Binah—with the Trinity.[28] At the same time, they treated Ein-Sof itself apophatically and did not equate it with anything.[29]

Masonic literature contains different versions of kabbalistic cosmogony, which were substantially derived from the writings of Christian kabbalists. One can find sophisticated reasoning on Ein-Sof as the prime source of emanation in a number of manuscript works by Russian Masons of the late eighteenth century. Thus, according to an anonymous treatise entitled *On the Ten Sefirot* (ca. 1783),

> Above all they [kabbalists] place the Ein-Sof, an infinite, perfect, boundless Being, i.e. the God Himself, in the most distant divine Abode, in the source of the inaccessible light, in the shade impenetrable for the created mind, and decorated with no features and no qualities. Thus the Ein-Sof is that being from which all ten sefirot emanate, from which all the influences within the creatures, all essence of existence, goodness, beauty, strength, and other virtues are derived.[30]

At the same time, the way in which Russian Masons treated Ein-Sof differs significantly from the way in which the concept is generally understood in Jewish and Christian kabbalah. They identified Ein-Sof with the first Sefirah Keter. Then, following the classical Christian kabbalah, where Keter is seen as corresponding to God the Father, they also called Ein-Sof the "Eternal Father"[31] and claimed that it is possible to discern in Ein-Sof prototypes of all things in the world, an infinite number of internal forces ever-changing and interacting with each other.

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[27] Reuchlin, *De Arte Cabbalistica*, Hagenau 1517, XXIa; cit. after: Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 121. Cf. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 440.

[28] See Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century*, 125–126.

[29] On the interpretation of Ein-Sof in Christian esotericism and Christian kabbalah, see also Schulitz, *Jakob Boehme und die Kabbalah*, 74–82; Häussermann, 'Theologia Emblematica', 281–293; Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 235–238.

[30] DMS RSL, F 14, N 1116, p. 5.

[31] See, e.g., DMS RSL, F 14, N 1116, pp. 7–8.

2.1. *Ivan Elagin and His Concept of Ein-Sof*

An explanation of the doctrine under discussion is contained in the writings of the first Grand Master of the Grand Provincial Lodge of Russia, Senator Ivan P. Elagin. He was probably one of the chief enthusiasts of kabbalah in Russian freemasonry. A high official and favorite of Catherine the Great, Elagin devoted his whole life to the quest for "true knowledge".[32] Elagin considered himself to be a reformer of Orthodox theology, and strove to renovate it by disclosing its mystical basis. To this effect he used different "keys", that is he adopted elements of different traditions supposedly containing parts of the "perennial wisdom". Although he was a devoted Orthodox Christian and a learned theologian, well-read in patristic writings, Elagin was also interested in non-Christian esoteric traditions, including Jewish kabbalah.

Elagin discussed the concepts of Ein-Sof and sefirot extensively in his treatise *Explanations of the Mysterious Meaning [of the Text] about Creation of the Universe in Holy Scripture, Which Is a Key for Understanding the Book of Truth and Errors*, written in the 1780s and kept unpublished in Masonic archives.[33] While also dealing with cosmogony, he focused his attention particularly on the problem of God *before* the creation. Orthodox theology declares this problem to be a mystery beyond human comprehension. Another trend in the theological thought of the church fathers, represented by Justin Martyr, Origen, Augustine, and some other early church fathers, who wrote about a chaotic matter pre-existent with God and of internal processes taking place within the Godhead before *creatio ex nihilo*, was almost forgotten by Russian theologians.[34]

In his *Explanations*, Elagin developed a kabbalistic version of Masonic cosmogony. It is not surprising that he found the doctrine of Ein-Sof to be of particular importance. In contrast to traditional Jewish kabbalah, however, he designated Ein-Sof "the Depth of God" and "the Eternal Essence", and described its inner structure in detail. In particular, he wrote:

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[32] See Melgunov & Sidorov (eds.), *Masonry in Its Past and Present*, vol. 1, 139–149; Pekarski, *Supplements to the History of Masonry in Russia in the Eighteenth Century*; Pypin, *Masonry in Russia*, 96–137; Serkov, *Russian Masonry, 1731–2000: An Encyclopaedia*, 323.

[33] Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RSAAA), F. 8, N 216, Pt. 6, f. 41–70r. See Burmistrov, 'Vladimir Soloviev and Russian Freemasonry', 37–41.

[34] E.g. Origen, *De Principii*, II: 1–3; Augustine, *Confessiones*, XI; id. *De Civitate Dei*, XII: 12–13.

> [. . .] before Creation [. . .] there was only the eternal divine Essence—that Foundation and that Mystery, from which all things descended. It assumes the Hebrew name Ein-Sof, the Depth of God. Inasmuch as the Eternal Essence, the Source of everything existed from the beginning, it contained everything [. . .] The all-perfect divine Being comprised that Eternal Essence with all Powers, Inscriptions, and Forms. The powers of Eternal Essence, combining and acting through each other, inscribed and imagined myriads and billions of forms and images which [. . .] instantly appeared and disappeared having different colors and forms.[35]

Elagin describes at length the complicated internal processes which took place within Ein-Sof before the emanation of the sefirot—or, before creation. He claims also that all these powers and forms within Ein-Sof constitute a common entity—Sophia, the Wisdom of God, which 'contains all the aids, norms, and rules to be used for the creation of every thing, She comprises also all the images, forms, and patterns of every thing'.[36]

Thus, according to Ivan Elagin, Ein-Sof is a repository of eternal ideas and potentialities which, taken together, constitute the divine Wisdom-Sophia. He also tries to define the internal structure of Ein-Sof and claims that one can find the key to this mystery in kabbalah, which is the most authoritative and reliable source of knowledge about the divine world. Proceeding to the kabbalistic scheme of the emanation of sefirot, Elagin identifies Ein-Sof with the first Sefirah Keter, the Crown,[37] and refers to it as to the first hypostasis of the Trinity, God the Father: 'Ein-Sof is the Father of Mercy, and He is called the Father because all people were created by Him in their eternal essence, and Jesus Christ Himself was begotten of Him'.[38] According to his scheme, at the beginning of the creation Ein-Sof/God the Father generates the Son and the Spirit-Sophia. Elagin plainly superimposes this triad on the high triad of sefirot—Keter, Chochmah, and Binah: 'This everlasting and indivisible Trinity is that Triangle which has been known at all times to every nation, though its true meaning was revealed only to the holy initiates [. . .]. This Triangle is the three highest Sefirot, and all the other Sefirot emanate from them'.[39]

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[35] RSAAA, F. 8, N 216, Pt. 6, f. 50v.
[36] Ibid., f. 50v–51.
[37] Ibid., f. 61v.
[38] Ibid., f. 63v, 65v.
[39] Ibid., f. 65–65v.

Thus, whereas in kabbalah Ein-Sof is an apophatical designation of God irrelevant to creation, Elagin considers Ein-Sof to be God the Father eternally comprising the Wisdom-Sophia—as a set of archetypes of creation—and emanating the Son-Word and the Wisdom in the form of Spirit, that is the second and third sefirot, Chochmah and Binah, Wisdom and Understanding.

2.2. *Vladimir Soloviev: Ein-Sof as God the Father*

We can find a similar interpretation of this topic in the writings of some Russian thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who took a keen interest in Jewish mysticism. Thus, the founder of Russian religious philosophy, Vladimir Soloviev, was especially interested in kabbalah—as well as in Gnosticism—in the early stages of his work, in the 1870s and early 1880s.[40] Most scholars assert that kabbalah exerted the greatest influence on Soloviev's concept of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, and on subsequent Russian Sophiology.[41] My opinion is, however, that this concept, having a specifically Christian background, is first of all a reinterpretation of the views of some European mystics of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, including Jacob Boehme, John Pordage, Gottfried Arnold, and Johann Georg Gichtel. Their writings enjoyed wide popularity in Russia from the late eighteenth century onward, after having being translated into Russian by Masons. Furthermore, the description of Sophia in Soloviev's works *Sophia* (1875) and *La Russie et l'Église Universelle* (1889) probably bears an imprint of Gnosticism, which was a constant object of Soloviev's interest since his youth.[42] At the same time, we can discern evident kabbalistic

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[40] According to Maxim Kovalevski, who met Soloviev in London in 1875, 'Soloviev worked in the British Museum, studying Kabbalah and literature on Kabbalah'. See Lukyanov, *On V.S. Soloviev in His Youth*, vol. 3, pt. 3., 136. Cf. also Zenkovski, *The History of Russian Philosophy*, vol. 2, 17; Florovsky, *Paths of Russian Theology*, 316; Losev, *Vladimir Soloviev and His Time*, 221–222, 251–253; Gaidenko, *Vladimir Soloviev and the Philosophy of the Silver Age*, 40, 47, 58.

[41] See, e.g., Carlson, 'Gnostic Elements in the Cosmogony of Vladimir Soloviev', 51; Kornblatt, 'Russian Religious Thought and the Jewish Kabbala', 75–95; idem, 'Solov'ev's Androgynous Sophia and the Jewish Kabbalah', 487–496; Bar-Yosef, 'Sophiology and the Concept of Femininity in Russian Symbolism and in Modern Hebrew Poetry', 62–65.

[42] See Kozirev, 'Paradoxes of an Unfinished Treatise', 152–170; idem, 'The Meaning of Love in V. Soloviev's Philosophy', 59–78; idem, 'Vladimir Soloviev and Anna Schmidt', 23–41; Carlson, 'Gnostic Elements in the Cosmogony of Vladimir Soloviev', 49–57.

elements in Soloviev's cosmogony and in his interpretation of the divine hierarchy.

While explaining the problem of God before and independent of the creation, Soloviev was confronted with the same problem as Ivan Elagin: being a Russian Orthodox philosopher he could not find an appropriate concept within his own tradition.[43] He solved this problem in a similar way, by identifying Ein-Sof with God the Father: 'The first phase of the Absolute Entity is Ein-Sof or God the Father (the Primeval God)'.[44] Soloviev often used the terms "Ein-Sof" and "God the Father" as synonyms, asserting that the very existence of Ein-Sof is conditioned by the existence of Logos,[45] because 'Ein-Sof in itself cannot be without the Word, which expresses it, and the Spirit, which maintains it'.[46]

Thus, both Soloviev and Elagin make Ein-Sof conditional upon something other, ascribing some positive attributes to it. They correlated and even identified it with the first hypostasis of the Trinity, at the same time maintaining that the Holy Spirit/Sophia eternally resides in Ein-Sof/God the Father. It is worthwhile noting that Soloviev's interpretation of Ein-Sof was subjected to bitter criticism by one of his outstanding followers—Sergei Bulgakov, who stated that 'Soloviev evidently confuses or at least insufficiently distinguishes God as "No-Thing" of negative theology, and God at the initial stage of His manifestation in the world'.[47] Bulgakov's criticism has to do both with Soloviev's and Elagin's ideas, both of whom defined Ein-Sof in positive terms while trying to explain how an all-sufficient Absolute could create something different and imperfect, that is the universe. The nature of the first step from concealment to manifestation was not clarified adequately enough either by the Orthodox theologians or in Russian metaphysics of the eighteenth century. Besides, it is well known that this problem has

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[43] See Burmistrov, 'Vladimir Soloviev and Kabbalah: A Preliminary Analysis', 28–30; idem, 'Kabbalah in Russian Philosophy in the Late 19th–early 20th century', 42–44; idem, 'Vladimir Soloviev and Russian Freemasonry: Some Kabbalistic Parallels', 41–42. This issue has also been briefly examined in J. D. Kornblatt's paper 'Vladimir Solov'ev on Spiritual Nationhood', 159–160.

[44] Soloviev, *Collected Works in 9 vols.*, vol. 1, 329, 347 (cf.: Soloviev, *Collected Works in 15 vols.*, vol. 2, 270, 284).

[45] Soloviev, *Collected Works in 9 vols.*, vol. 1, 331; Soloviev, *Collected Works in 15 vols.*, vol. 2, 271.

[46] Soloviev, *Collected Works in 9 vols.*, vol. 3, 88 (cf. also p. 95); vol. 1, 346.

[47] Bulgakov, *The Non-Evening Light*, 129–130. On Bulgakov's interpretation of some kabbalistic doctrines see Burmistrov, 'Kabbalah in Russian Philosophy in the late 19th–early 20th century', 47–50.

been extremely important for Jewish mysticism from the very outset.[48] Therefore it is not surprising that some mystically inclined Russian thinkers turned to kabbalah in search for a solution.

3. *Adam Kadmon: The Primordial Man of Kabbalah*

Another Jewish mystical concept adopted both by Russian Masons and religious thinkers was the idea of Adam Kadmon. In kabbalah, Adam Kadmon, Primordial or Supernal Man,[49] is the first and supreme form of emanation from Ein-Sof and at the same time 'the mystic primordial image of the Godhead'[50] embracing the ten sefirot as well as the prototype of man. This concept was especially developed in Lurianic kabbalah, where Adam Kadmon was conceived as an intermediary between the source of emanation and the world of sefirot.[51]

Adam Kadmon became one of the basic ideas in the Christian kabbalah of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. This concept was interpreted in various ways, but the identification of Adam Kadmon with primordial Christ, the prototype of creation, was the keynote in the works on kabbalah written by Christians starting with Pico della Mirandola. In the seventeenth century this idea became a commonplace in esoteric literature.[52] The notion of the Messiah, as propounded by Christian kabbalists, was fundamentally different from the traditional church doctrine of Jesus. As a rule, they identified the primeval Christ with the Adam Kadmon and—starting with Knorr von Rosenroth—with the *parzuf* called *Ze'ir Anpin* in the Lurianic kabbalah.[53]

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[48] Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88–91; idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 430–454. Cf. Magid, *Origin and Overcoming the Beginning*.

[49] The term *ha-adam ha-kadmon* ("primordial man") occurs for the first time in *Sod Yedi'at ha-Mezi'ut*, a treatise from the *Sefer ha-Iyyun* circle (early thirteenth century).

[50] Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 60; see also ibid., 46, 229–232.

[51] On Adam Kadmon see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 104, 112–115, 128; idem, *Kabbalah*, 137–140.

[52] Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 200. See also Häussermann, 'Theologia Emblematica', 304–316; Abrams, 'The Boundaries of Divine Ontology', 291–321.

[53] *Parzuf* (Heb. "face [of God]") is the kabbalistic expression for the potencies underlying the sefirot; in every sefirah one particular aspect of the divine personality is represented, though always as part of a complete unity. In a certain way, *Ze'ir Anpin* (Heb. "Impatient"), comprising six sefirot from Chesed to Yesod, represents a significant part of Adam Kadmon. This *parzuf* played a central part in the restoration of the world, and such an identification was by no means surprising because, according to Luria's teaching, it was in *Ze'ir Anpin* born of the "heavenly or divine mother" that God in a sense gave birth to Himself. See Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 266–267.

In a dialog between a Christian philosopher and a Jewish kabbalist, composed by F. M. van Helmont, the Christian states unambiguously: 'Just that one whom you name Adam Kadmon, we name Christ'.[54] It was on such an interpretation of this relationship that the idea of a Universal Church rested: since all human souls were initially contained within the primordial man (Adam Kadmon/Christ), Christ is always present in each soul. Hence follows the idea of the *apokatastasis*, or universal salvation, and of the lack of importance of the differences between various religions. The doctrine of the universal restoration, rejecting the eternal nature of hell, became the basis of the soteriology of Ch. Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689) and the Sulzbach circle of Christian kabbalists.[55]

3.1. *Adam Kadmon in Russian Masonic Doctrine*

The concept of Adam Kadmon, Primordial Man, became one of the basic ideas of Russian Masonic doctrine.[56] Most importantly, Russian Masons drew a sharp distinction between Adam Kadmon as primordial Christ, and the historical Jesus. As far as I know, this distinction cannot be found in earlier esoteric literature—at least, not in an explicit form.

Thus, Ivan Elagin reserved the role of the Savior only for the primordial Adam/Christ; the historical Jesus of Nazareth is considered only a "hieroglyph" or "acting representation" of the primordial one, but not the true Savior. Separating the eternal Jesus/Adam Kadmon from the

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The first *parzuf Arikh Anpin* (Heb. "Long Suffering"), embracing the higher triad of sefirot, was identified with God the Father. On the interpretation of this doctrine in the circle of Knorr von Rosenroth, F. M. van Helmont, and G. Keiht see also Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century*, 127–129, 187.

[54] [Van Helmont], *Adumbratio Kabbalae Christianae*, 25–26; Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter*, 239–240. Cf. also similar expressions in Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, 10–11; Wachter, *Elucidarius Cabalisticus*, 16 ('Sciendum, quod Adam Cadmon, quod interpretantur *homo primus & coelestis*, juxta Cabalistas fit ipse Messias seu Primogenitus Dei ante omnes creaturas').

[55] Some of these concepts are analyzed in Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century*, 120–132 (as well as in certain works to which Coudert refers); see also Burmistrov, '*Kabbala Denudata* Rediscovered'; idem, 'Christian Kabbalah and Jewish Universalism'.

[56] See interpretations of this idea in Russian Masonic manuscripts of the 1780s: 'A Short Notion on Kabbalah', DMS RSL, F. 14, N 992, f. 3–4, 8, 14–15; 'On Ten Sefirot', DMS RSL, F. 14, N 1116, pp. 23–24. On Adam Kadmon in the Russian Romantic literature inspired by Masonic ideology, see Baehr, 'The Masonic Component in Eighteenth-Century Russian Literature', 131–132; idem, *The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth Century Russia*, 107–109; Schneider, *Quest for Mysteries*, 103–104.

historical Jesus Christ, Elagin sometimes makes suggestions which are quite heretical from the point of view of Orthodox Christianity:

> The one who was born 1780 years ago can neither be nor be named nor be honored as the First-born, the First-begotten Son, the Primary Man, and hence least of all, as God. That one who was born by a woman is not God, but a man similar to us in his passions, who had taken on himself the hieroglyph of Primordial Adam, or Son. And that same Hieroglyph [. . .] this Christ, or Jesus Hieroglyph, has a desire to present himself as True Jesus Immortal, or showing himself as Adam [. . .]. Saying "Jesus" means Savior; the Savior can not be Savior for that Race which already existed before Him, and was abolished by the death before Him; for that one who saw [or, knew] the carnal death can not be spared from death; but the first and old Adam, before the multiplication of the Human Race, was already the Savior of His Race from the true Spiritual Death through the experience of carnal death [. . .].[57]

Explaining the meaning of the name "Jesus", Elagin writes it down by means of three Hebrew characters—Yod, Shin, Yod. Then he deciphers this acronym in the following way:

> ישי is a name, or designation of man [. . .]. The name ישי, Yishai, Jesus, [can be divided] into three parts: י Yishai, ש Sheker, י Yomos: Yishai sheker yomos, i.e. 'the false Jesus will quietly die'.[58] This false Jesus, as many other impostors, died quietly, but his teaching is true, because he was the superior preacher, being a master of the school of Essenes which came from Egypt.[59]

In such a way, discussing the nature of the primordial Adam/Jesus and the nature of the historical Jesus, Elagin not only associates himself with one of the early Christian heresies, but also in effect denies the Incarnation and the divinity of Jesus Christ! For him, the historical Jesus is just a man, an adept of an ancient esoteric school. It thus happened that under the influence of kabbalah Elagin came to reject the basic Christian dogma of the Trinity, and his reasons seem to be very similar to the arguments of the Jews who refuted Christian dogmatics at the time of Jewish-Christian disputations in medieval Europe.[60]

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[57] RSAAA, F 8, N 216, Pt. 6, f. 67v.
[58] That is: "ישי sheker yamut".
[59] RSAAA, F 8, N 216, Pt. 6, f. 67v.
[60] Not to mention the heresy of Arius of Alexandria.

3.2. *Adam Kadmon According to Vladimir Soloviev*

What interpretation does Soloviev give to the concept of Adam Kadmon? According to his view, Christ and Sophia originated from Ein-Sof in the process of emanation. In this case, however, he does not mean the God-man Jesus Christ, but just the primordial Man—Adam Kadmon. In the drafts of the treatise *Sophia* one can find a scheme similar to the Tree of Sefirot. In this scheme Soloviev uses the names "Christ" and "Adam Kadmon" as synonyms referring to one of the highest entities, whereas the historical "Jesus" is located at the very bottom of the scheme.[61] According to another scheme, 'Logos + Sophia = Adam Kadmon'.[62] Echoing the views of Ivan Elagin and other Russian Masons of the eighteenth century, Soloviev declares that Anima Mundi 'is a conscious center and an inner universal interrelationship—Adam Kadmon'.[63] Therefore, like Elagin, Soloviev makes a clear distinction between the Heavenly Man (Christ, Adam Kadmon) and Jesus.

4. *Holy Names, Philosophy of Language, and Kabbalah in Russia*

Naturally, Russian Masons also had a keen interest in the nature of language, the concept of universal symbolism, and the names of God as tools to gain a mystical apprehension of the Godhead.[64] They often treated this problem in connection with their understanding of kabbalistic doctrine. According to their views, we can gain an idea of the nature of God Himself only by means of "inscriptions" or hieroglyphs, and precisely the kabbalah contains those hieroglyphs which 'represent attributes of things in the world'.[65] Besides, the Russian brethren shared with some Western European Masons the understanding that Hebrew was the first and holy language, the proto-language which became the

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[61] Soloviev, *Collected Works in 15 vols.*, vol. 2, 172.
[62] Ibid., 382.
[63] Ibid., 57.
[64] Of course, they were well acquainted with various interpretations of these themes in Christian kabbalah by Pico, Reuchlin, Kircher, et al. See Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Christian Kabbalah', 81–122 (esp. 81–88 on the name "Jesus" in Christian Kabbalah); Edel, 'Ideenmetaphysik und Buchstabenmystik', 171–192; Idel, 'Kabbalah, Hieroglyphicity and Hieroglyphs', 24–47.
[65] (Anon.), 'The Condition of Man before the Fall', 238. On different concepts of hieroglyphicity in Jewish and Christian Kabbalah see Idel, 'Kabbalah, Hieroglyphicity and Hieroglyphs'.

source of every other language.[66] Russian translations of some kabbalistic texts dealing with the mysticism of language and of the holy names are found in Moscow archives. Probably the most representative among them is a Russian translation of Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orah* ('The Gates of Light'), entitled *Shaare oire, Light Gates: Translation from Hebrew*.[67] This extensive treatise is devoted to a detailed description of the kabbalistic symbols related to emanation of sefirot and their correspondence with the names of God, and contains a very detailed interpretation of the holy names.[68] The Russian brethren tried to correlate the kabbalistic theory of the names of God with a similar ancient Christian tradition of the veneration of holy names going back to the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Simeon the New Theologian, and several other church fathers. In this way they wanted to contribute to the improvement of Orthodox theology, considering kabbalah an important depository of ideas for the development of their own Christian theories.

This subject became especially important a century later, when a group of monks on Mount Athos proposed their own interpretation of the doctrine of holy names and their glorification (*imyaslaviye*). From the outset this movement provoked a sharp negative reaction from church officials. The monks were forcibly removed from Mount Athos and scattered throughout the Russian Empire, and their doctrine was condemned. Subsequently, some Russian Orthodox philosophers and theologians—among them Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov, and Alexei Losev (1893–1988)—came out in support of the movement of name-glorifiers (*imyaslavtsi*) and tried to elaborate a philosophical explanation of their ideas.[69]

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[66] On this Renaissance idea of Hebrew as the primordial language see Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma*, 131–152; Klein, 'Die ursprüngliche Einheit der Sprachen', 25–56; Kuntz, 'The Original Language', 123–150. On similar views in Jewish kabbalah see Idel, 'The Infant Experiment', 57–79.

[67] DMS RSL, F 14, N 1655, pp. 1–486; F 147, N 208, f. 1–128. See Endel, 'On a Rare Kabbalistic Codex from Russian Masonic Archives', 57–66; idem, 'Some Original Kabbalistic Concepts in the Masonic Codex *On the Sefirot*', 37–50.

[68] On Joseph Gikatilla and his book see Grözinger, *Jüdisches Denken*, vol. 2, 395–462; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 409–411; Idel, *Historical Introduction*, xxiii–xxxiv.

[69] Among the recent publications on the *imyaslaviye* movement one can mention: Hylarion (Alfeev), *The Holy Mystery of the Church*; Borshch, *Imyaslaviye: Collection of Theological, Publicistic Papers, Documents and Commentaries*; Leskis, *Dispute Over the Name of God*. Cf. also Bezlepkin, *Philosophy of Language in Russia*, 324–380.

Whereas Soloviev was mainly occupied with the problem of cosmogony, pantheism, and the divine presence in this world, Florensky and his colleagues tried to philosophically substantiate an old Christian Orthodox mystical practice consisting in the ceaseless reiteration of the name "Jesus" (the so-called "Jesus Prayer").[70] This mystical practice also includes some psychophysical techniques (concerned with breathing, postures of the body, etc.) and leads to a very intense mystical experience, among other things of unity with God, and of an unbearable Light. One of the main principles of this doctrine is that God is really present in his name, that his name has a divine essence, and that in a way the name of God is God himself. Needless to say, this idea is very close to corresponding Jewish mystical concepts. It is not surprising that Russian name-glorifiers were suspected of heresy and idolatry.

There is a striking similarity between the interpretations of the nature of name in kabbalah and in *imyaslaviye*.[71] Thus, according to Scholem, kabbalah considers names to be the emanations of light, the energies or forces, ideas, and the ultimate goal of human knowledge.[72] This description coincides with an explanation of the names in *imyaslaviye* proposed by A. Losev.[73] It is here also essential to mention the kabbalistic doctrine of letters, presented as early as in the *Sefer Yeẓirah*. According to this doctrine, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet—rather than the words or concepts—are elements of the ontic, or divine, reality, the prime elements underlying the very essence of being.[74] In a sense, this position is the most consistent expression of philosophic realism, as applied to language. In Jewish tradition words are secondary to letters; a word only restricts and consolidates the innumerable variety of meanings contained in every letter. As Moshe Idel puts it,

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[70] See, first of all, Florensky, '*Imyaslaviye* As a Philosophic Premise' (*Collected Works in 4 vols.*, vol. 3(1), 287–363); Losev, *The Name: Works and Translations*, 4–392; idem, 'Problems of the Philosophy of Name', in: Losev, *Personality and Absolute*, 225–376.

[71] See Burmistrov, 'Imyaslaviye and Kabbalah: On the Onomatology of Pavel Florensky and Gershom Scholem', 34–37.

[72] This topic is discussed at length in Scholem's famous paper 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala'. See also Dan, 'The Name of God, the Name of the Rose, and the Concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism', 228–248.

[73] See, e.g., Losev, *The Name: Works and Translations*, 18–20 ('*Imyaslaviye* Presented as a System'); Postovalova, 'The World as a Name in A. Losev's Religious Philosophy', 164–170.

[74] See Scholem, 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala', 72–75; idem, *Kabbalah*, 23–30; Idel, 'On Talismanic Language in Jewish Mysticism', 23–41.

> the letters do not serve, in any way, as a channel of transmitting meaning; too powerful an instrument, the letters are conceived of as creative elements [. . .] as stones, as full-fledged entities, as components intended to build up an edifice of words to serve as a temple for God and a place of encountering Him for the mystic.[75]

Russian philosophers greatly appreciated 'the kabbalistic doctrine of the divine alphabet and holy names' as 'probably the most developed system of onomatology that has ever existed in the history of religions'. In Losev's words, 'Kabbalah expounds the doctrine of holy names better than any other system of mysticism'.[76] Pavel Florensky considered names to be clots of energy, mystical centers of persons, which have direct connection with the divine reality, with the world of ideas. Holy names have the highest energetic status.[77] Pronouncing the holy name, a prayer 'enters into this or that relation with God', or, in other words, 'pronouncing the name of God is a living entering into Him'.[78] This mystical practice of meditation on the holy names in many respects resembles certain Jewish mystical techniques, including those of the school of ecstatic kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia,[79] as well as some Jewish magical practices.[80] The attitude to the problem of name and language, however, is typical of Jewish mysticism in general, since, as Gershom Scholem puts it, according to kabbalah the omnipotence of God is concentrated entirely within His Name; 'the concentrated power of God himself [. . .] is expressed in the name'.[81] The man who con-

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[75] Idel, 'Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism', 43. On "hieroglyphic approaches" to letters in Jewish and Christian kabbalah, very similar to those in Russian Masonry and philosophy of language, see also Idel, 'Kabbalah, Hieroglyphicity and Hieroglyphs', 11–47.

[76] Losev, *Personality and Absolute*, 308, 309. Cf. Scholem's notion that the 'conception of language maintained by the Kabbalists [. . .] [was] the most highly instructive paradigm of a mystical theory of language' (Scholem, 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala', 62).

[77] See his letter to V. Kozhevnikov (1912): Florensky, *Collected Works in 4 vols.*, vol. 3(2), 333.

[78] Florensky, *Collected Works in 4 vols.*, vol. 3(1), 293, 362.

[79] See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*.

[80] See Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 78–103; Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma*, 81–90.

[81] Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, 59. On different linguistic concepts of kabbalah see also: Scholem, 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala'; Idel, *Absorbing Perfections*, 314–352 (esp. 319–320); idem, *Enchanted Chains*, 76–121; idem, 'Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism', 42–79; idem, 'Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names', 97–122; Katz, 'Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning', 3–41; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 190–260.

templates the Name by an inward vision joins God Himself. According to Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (thirteenth century), the Name of God is God Himself, 'the Tetragrammaton is completely identified with the Godhead [. . .]. Language is not a means by which God is achieved, because it is God himself'.[82]

Joseph Dan has pointed out that 'such a union of a linguistic element and the essence of the supreme divinity cannot be found elsewhere in Western culture',[83] but we do have excellent examples of this kind in the works of Russian name-glorifiers. Thus, the monk Hylarion (Dolmatschev; ca. 1845–1916), whose ideas became the main cause of the church debates on this issue, wrote in his famous book *On the Caucasian Mountains* (1910): 'God Himself is in His Name, with all His entity and all His innumerable features'.[84] This formula seems to be a direct paraphrase of the well-known passage of the early Jewish mystical text *Shi'ur Qomah*, originating in late antiquity: 'His name is from Him and in Him is the name of His Glory [. . .] and Your name is in You and You are in Your name'.[85] Celibate priest Antonii Bulatovich (1870–1919), the main theorist of the *imyaslaviye* movement, repeated this notion: 'The Name *Jesus* is in its essence God Himself [. . .] it is the Truth consubstantial to the Trinity, triune Truth'.[86] John of Cronstadt in his book *My Life in Christ* also repeatedly declares that 'the Name of God is God Himself', and that 'God is present in His Name entirely, by all His entity'.[87]

The presentation of the theory of name and linguistic magic in Russian philosophy of the "Silver Age" in many respects resemble kabbalistic ideas. Thus, Losev declares that

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[82] Dan, 'The Name of God, the Name of the Rose, and the concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism', 242. R. Eleazar made these statements in his book *Sefer ha-shem* ('The Book of the Name') which was published for the first time only in 2004 (*Sifrei ha-R"A mi-Germiza*, Jerusalem: Sodei Razaya 2004).

[83] Dan, 'The Name of God, the Name of the Rose, and the Concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism', 242.

[84] Hylarion, *On the Caucasian Mountains*, 11.

[85] Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions*, 188.

[86] Bulatovich, *Apology of the Faith in the Name of God and the Name Jesus*, 25, 93. One can find many similar assertions in the writings of both the members of the movement and the religious philosophers who shared their views. See, first of all, Leskis, *Dispute over the Name of God*. See also: Bulatovich, *My Thought in Christ*, 171–172. Cf. Hylarion (Alfeev), *The Holy Mystery of the Church*, vol. 1, 202–287 (ch. IV: 'Veneration of the Holy Name and Jesus Prayer in Russian Tradition').

[87] John of Cronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, 129, 238, 309–310.

> the name of God is for man the greatest source of power which he can imagine. It is the source of power for the whole universe. All that which is concerned with the holy names applies also to separate human names; being magical formulae, they also bring spiritual forces to bear down on earth. The names can act in such a way unconsciously for man.[88]

Strikingly similar ideas can be found in Jewish mystical texts on so-called talismanic magic, in particular in the works of Yohanan Alemanno (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries), Menahem Azariah di Fano (sixteenth century), and in some Hasidic writings.[89] As Moshe Idel points out, 'we should not ignore the possibility that the Jewish sources [. . .] had an influence on the magical vision of language found in Christian sources [. . .]. Christian Kabbalists [. . .] were especially attracted by the magical view of language and were well acquainted with the Kabbalah'.[90] Given a continual interest in the teachings both of the Christian and Jewish kabbalists in Russian esoteric circles, it is reasonable to assume that in the case in question we deal with a real interaction between two esoteric traditions—Jewish mysticism and the Christian Orthodox theology of holy names.

When discussing the semantics of proper names, Florensky used kabbalistic or quasi-kabbalistic methods of word deconstruction. He wrote Russian names by means of Hebrew characters, transcribing Russian characters into Hebrew, and then dividing the names into two or more parts. After that he identified these characters or parts of words with certain metaphysical principles. In this way he tried to discover the hidden structure of the words and their inner dynamics.[91]

Another outstanding enthusiast of kabbalah, Russian philosopher and Orthodox priest Sergei Bulgakov, one of the leading Russian theologians

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[88] Losev, *The Name: Works and Translations*, 243 (from Losev's *Thing and Name*). A special chapter on kabbalistic linguistics is contained in this book (see Losev, *The Name: Works and Translations*, 168–245; idem, *Personality and Absolute*, 306–376; this chapter, entitled 'From the History of Name', provides numerous quotations from the Zohar and some other kabbalistic texts, lengthy expositions of the theory of sefirot, etc.).

[89] See Idel, 'On Talismanic Language in Jewish Mysticism'. See especially the passage from "Collectanaea" of Yohanan Alemano who was a companion and teacher of Pico della Mirandola, quoted by Idel on p. 29.

[90] Ibid., 31.

[91] Florensky, *Collected Works in 4 vols*, vol. 3, 177–179, 280–281, etc. On the attitude of Florensky to Hebrew as a sacred language see also Burmistrov, 'Pavel Florensky as a Hebraist', 212–218. Florensky and like-minded Russian thinkers used as the main source of this, so to say, quasi-kabbalistic linguistics the works of the noted French occultist and Freemason Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767–1825). On Fabre d'Olivet and his works, see Cellier, *Fabre d'Olivet*; McCalla, 'Fabre d'Olivet', 350–354.

of the twentieth century, also claims in his book *Philosophy of Name*[92] that letters—like numbers—have an autonomous being, independent of the words. The sacred language, i.e. Hebrew, 'is an absolute language which coincides in all details with the structure of the Universe, and therefore this is an absolute key which is entirely consonant with the harmony of the world [. . .] even every letter reveals the continuity and pattern of the Universe'. Therefore 'this language hides in its depths the ultimate nature of things and possesses a great power'.[93]

It is quite obvious that the concept of language described by Bulgakov corresponds well with the teaching of Jewish kabbalah, especially when he claims that Hebrew 'is ontological and sacred [language] par excellence', and 'in the framework of a [Hebrew] word one can discover a non-semantic but equally important *numerical* sense'.[94] Of course, the Russian philosophers discussed the nature of the holy names and language in terms of Christian Orthodox theology, but they would no doubt have agreed with the following epitome of Jewish mystical linguistics, proposed by Joseph Dan:

> In the concept of the holy name of God, language stops being a means and becomes an independent divine essence, in which language and divinity are united. The holy name of God is not an expression of the divine: it is the essence of divinity itself. It is not revelation, it is the Revealer. It is not the instrument of creation, but the Creator [. . .]. God has become a linguistic entity.[95]

5. *Russian Philosophy of Language and Kabbalah: Differences and Similarity*

Such similarities notwithstanding, one should not neglect a significant difference between kabbalistic linguistics and its interpretation in Russian philosophy. The mainstream of kabbalistic linguistics deals with *only one* language, that is Hebrew, which was considered to be 'the main instrument of the creation of the world, and [. . .] the vessel that is prepared by man to contain the divine light that is attracted therein

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[92] Bulgakov was expelled from Russia in 1922. This book was written in the 1920s and early 1930s but published only after his death, in Paris, in 1953.

[93] Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Name*, 61, 64–65.

[94] Ibid., 65.

[95] Dan, 'The Name of God, the Name of the Rose, and the Concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism', 229.

in order to experience an act of union or communion'.[96] At the same time, according to Pavel Florensky, the names in their essence are an extra-linguistic reality and

> it is impossible to translate a name into another language correctly enough; also it can not be introduced as such into a foreign language to become its own natural element. The name is to be *recreated* in this language anew, and then this name would be simply some other aspect of the same archetypal Name.[97]

I believe, however, that we can find some traits similar to the views of Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov in the school of prophetic or ecstatic kabbalah founded in the late thirteenth century by the famous Spanish and Italian kabbalist Abraham Abulafia. It is known that the practices of this school were based upon transposing—and otherwise combining—letters of the Hebrew alphabet, primarily those that compose the name of God. Describing his mystical-linguistic system based on the notion of Hebrew as *the* divine language, Abulafia at the same time maintained that all languages to a certain extent retain their bond with the Hebrew protolanguage, being, as it were, its distorted descendants. In his texts, Abulafia used words from Latin, ancient Greek, Arabic, Italian, and other languages. He believed that 'every uttered word consists of sacred letters so that combining, dividing and recombining letters reveals profound mysteries before him and explains to him the enigma of the tie of all those dialects to the sacred language'.[98] Abulafia explicitly points out the necessity of working with the various languages of the world: 'It is necessary to fuse all languages into one sacred language, until it would appear that every word uttered by a speaker consists of sacred letters, which are the 22 consonants of the Hebrew alphabet'.[99]

6. *Conclusions*

There is every reason to believe that kabbalah became an important source for Russian religious and mystical philosophy—along with Hermeticism, Gnosticism, and other European esoteric doctrines. It

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[96] Idel, 'Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism', 43. Cf. Scholem, 'The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbala', 71.
[97] Florensky, *Collected Works in 4 vols.*, vol. 3(2), 232–233.
[98] Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, 190.
[99] Ibid., 295.

is possible to discern two main trends or approaches in the attitude of Russian thinkers to kabbalah. The first one is a theosophical or metaphysical approach; this means that one can appeal to kabbalah in order to explain the structure of the universe, its hierarchy, and its dynamics—in particular, the first step from the Absolute to creation or the relationship within the Christian Trinity. The second trend is the linguistic approach, which strives to reveal a linguistic reality behind and in the very essence of the world, and to display the tie between this world and God. Curiously enough, this division practically coincides with the division of kabbalah itself as suggested by Moshe Idel. As is well known, he defines two main types of Jewish mysticism: theosophical or theurgical, representing the mainstream of kabbalistic tradition, and ecstatic or unitive, teaching how to attain a state of prophecy and to approach God as closely as possible by means of linguistic permutations and repetition of the holy names.[100] We see basically the same situation in Russian mystical philosophy, and it is quite possible that these two types are characteristic of the history of mysticism or esotericism in general.

It is important to note also that the Russian thinkers I have dealt with were known above all as theorists. They tried to create a philosophical basis, to find a rationale for some mystical doctrines and practices that existed in Russia. But at the same time, all of them—Ivan Elagin and other "theoretical" Masons, Vladimir Soloviev, Pavel Florensky, Sergei Bulgakov—reported having very intense personal mystical experiences.[101] Thus, they managed to combine a theoretical approach to these problems with a first-hand knowledge of mystical phenomena. It is particularly for this reason that they were so receptive to alien esoteric notions and traditions, at the same time keeping a very strict adherence to the Orthodox Church.

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[100] Cf. the definition proposed by Abraham Abulafia in *Ve-zot li-Yehudah*: '[Kabbalah] is divided into two parts: one is the part that deals with the knowledge of God by the way of the ten sefirot [. . .]. The other part [of Kabbalah] consists of the knowledge of God through the twenty-two letters, out of which, and out of whose vowels and cantillation-marks, the divine names [. . .] are composed'; cit. after Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, 80.

[101] Being a visionary, Soloviev had several—at least four—visions of Sophia and called them "meetings" in his poems. Besides, he was a medium and repeatedly fell into an altered state of consciousness. He wrote down texts by automatic writing while under suggestion. See Kravtschenko, *Mysticism in Russian Philosophic Thought*, 82–109. In his philosophical works Soloviev always claimed that mysticism is the highest level of the highest sphere of human reality.

We see that Russian Freemasons of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and their intellectual successors—Russian philosophers and theologians who lived a century later—turned to kabbalah in order to solve problems which they felt were not adequately elaborated in Christian Orthodox theology. Thus, using kabbalistic concepts, they tried to overcome the difficulties of Christian dogmatics, e.g. the dogma of the incarnation, and in this case came to a Gnostic concept of the Savior. We can in their writings find other examples, where esoteric ideas drawn from different traditions were used to master ideological and theological difficulties and inconsistencies. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that there was a specific intellectual tradition of adapting certain kabbalistic ideas to Russian Orthodox thought. Russian authors often used kabbalah because they perceived it as the most authoritative doctrine of the act of creation, of the development of the created world, and of salvation. Of course, syncretism is a characteristic feature of every Masonic or theosophical system. In my opinion, however, Russian religious thinkers were unique because they were able to reconcile extreme religious conservatism with an unusual receptivity to alien systems and doctrines. They felt that their own religious tradition was in stagnation and hoped to overcome this spiritual crisis. They looked for a way out of this situation, not within the framework of Orthodoxy, but rather in different esoteric doctrines and in the mystical teachings of other religions—in particular, in Jewish mysticism.

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ADORNO'S KABBALAH: SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS[1]

Steven M. Wasserstrom

A properly rounded reading of Theodor W. Adorno's conception of kabbalah naturally requires the close study of his complete works. The present paper attempts nothing more than theoretical and bibliographical beginnings. It pretends to systematic review neither of the primary nor of the secondary sources. However, I can sketch something of the breadth if not depth of his thinking on Jewish mysticism, especially in the context of his philosophy of religion, such as it was. Given that the present essay is, so far as I have been able to discover, the first study of Adorno's kabbalah, I will cite his own words fairly extensively, on the one hand, and, on the other, I will not harmonize intrinsic incoherence, at least partly in deference to his own predilection for the fragment. As he once confessed, 'I am fully aware of how unsatisfactory these fragmentary theses are'.[2]

Adorno reviled myth, magic, and occultism equally. A self-styled nemesis of mystagogery, Adorno's loathing of "irrationalism" runs like a crimson vein through his corpus. In this regard he aligned himself with the so-called "Warm Current" of Western Marxism, especially Max Horkheimer, Ernst Bloch, and Georg Lukács, all of whom put up the staunchest philosophical defenses against "regression" into "irrationality".[3] The extreme version of this revulsion on the part of Adorno's cohort came, perhaps, in Lukács' *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*. The theme had been more or less constant, in any case, and it provides a general philosophical context for the following.[4]

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[1] I thank the Dean of Reed College, Peter Steinberger, and the Stillman Drake Fund for support of this project. It could not have been completed without the perspicuous and diligent aid of Jacob Vahid Brown, for which I am especially grateful. I also thank Werner Brandt, Frederike Hener, and John Dawson for help rendered. The present essay is a continuation of 'Philologist's Abyss: Further Thoughts on the Poetry of Gershom Scholem'. Delivered at the conference on the poetry of Gershom Scholem, The University of Chicago Divinity School, February 2004. I thank Paul Mendes-Flohr for the latter invitation.

[2] Adorno, 'Theses Upon Art and Religion Today', 681.

[3] For a general discussion see Rockmore, *Irrationalism*.

[4] For more on this context, see Mendieta (ed.), *The Frankfurt School on Religion*; Kohlenbach & Geuss (eds.), *The Early Frankfurt School and Religion*.

A final preliminary to these preliminaries. If Adorno is difficulty personified and if kabbalah is the prototypically arcane science, then Adorno's kabbalah is difficulty squared, so to speak. In reviewing the Scholem-Adorno correspondence, Jeremy Adler wryly noted that 'the spectacle of the kabbalah scholar complaining to the philosopher about the incomprehensibilities of *Negative Dialectics* is a rare intellectual treat'.[5] I hope in the following pages to make a start toward distinguishing, in the matter of Adorno's kabbalah, the dignities of intrinsic difficulty from the embarrassments of plain error, which Adorno himself struggled only dimly to distinguish. 'The thicket is no sacred grove. There is a duty to clarify all difficulties that result from merely esoteric complacency'.[6]

1. *Adorno, Scholem, and Kabbalah*

1.1. *Adorno on Religion*

'I see no other possibility than an extreme ascesis toward any type of revealed faith, an extreme loyalty to the prohibition of images, far beyond what this once originally meant'.[7] This final sentence from his 1957 essay 'Reason and Revelation' exemplifies what we already know more generally, and that is that Adorno's irreligion *was* his religion. Plenty has been written about Adorno's "inverse theology" or "negative theology".[8] Nowhere, perhaps, did he put it as poignantly and directly as in a 1941 letter sent to his then-collaborator, Max Horkheimer. 'I have a weak, infinitely weak, feeling that it is still possible to think the secret [that] theology is shrinking [and that] from the most central point of view, there is no difference between theology's relation to the negative and its relation to the positive [. . .]'.[9]

Given this shrinkage, the philosopher was driven elsewhere for "redemption" (as he usually named his ultimacy). If Adorno, a lifelong composer and musicologist, had any religion, then, it was aesthetic, as some of his statements would in fact seem to suggest. '[Works of art] alone possess the capability to express the ineffable, to represent the unrepresentable, by virtue of the magical, transformative capabilities of

[5] Adler 'In the absence of God', 4.
[6] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 86.
[7] Idem, 'Reason and Revelation', 142.
[8] The literature is gathered in Pritchard, '"*Bilderverbot*" Meets Body'.
[9] 4 September 1941, cited in Pritchard, '"*Bilderverbot*" Meets Body', 305.

aesthetic *Schein* [illusion]. Works of art simultaneously represent a secular redemption of myth [. . .]'.[10] The category "redemption", however, was the promise surviving all others, even that of art. 'The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique'.[11]

A cottage industry has developed on the subject of Adorno and religion. It rarely acknowledges, however, the misogynistic depths of his philosophy. These sentiments, unmistakably heartfelt, are hair-raising. 'The shrew, a fossilized survival of the bourgeois esteem of women, is invading society today. With her endless nagging she takes revenge in her own home for the misery inflicted upon her sex from time immemorial [. . .]. The blood-lust a woman displays in a pogrom outdoes that of a man'.[12] This open antipathy underwrote his correlation of women and occultism. 'The lonely woman seeks refuge in a hotchpotch of science and magic, in monstrosities bred in the fancy of the civil servant and the Nordic clairvoyant'.[13] For present purposes, it is ironic that Adorno showed no evidence that he was aware that a similar prejudice was so deeply rooted in the rabbinic tradition that it was enshrined in *Pirke Avot*—'The more women, the more witchcraft'.[14] And so, with notorious snobbery, he gazed down from a great height not only on women and astrologers but also on ordinary Jewish belief and practice.

1.2. *Adorno on Judaism*

For the "standpoint of redemption" it is necessary to turn from art to Adorno's (mis)understanding of Judaism. In his 'Salute' to Gershom G. Scholem on his seventeenth birthday, Adorno admirably confessed his own

> [. . .] ignorance not only of the Kabbala, the tradition of Jewish mysticism, but of Jewish studies in general, of which I never learned anything other than what I read in Scholem's writings, particularly his main work, *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, and, before that, from [Scholem's] reflections on Benjamin's speculations; speculations, though, which had a significant

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[10] As cited in Wolin, 'Utopia, Mimesis and Reconciliation', 43.
[11] *Minima Moralia*, 247.
[12] Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 250.
[13] Ibid.
[14] '*Marbeh nashim marbeh keshafim*' [II, 8].

> impact on German idealism and which were thus philosophically more familiar and closer to me than one would have expected given my lack of philological and historical knowledge.[15]

Adorno's professed ignorance of things Jewish is borne out in his work.[16] Pritchard rightly notes, for example, that 'Adorno's naïveté with regard to Judaism is evident in his assumption that the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is specifically Christian'.[17] Similarly, Adorno explicitly repudiated another fundamental tenet of Jewish belief, the immortality of the soul. 'The name alone, revealed through a natural death, not the living soul, vouches for that in man which is immortal'.[18] When Adorno wrote of Judaism in general terms he was usually mistaken or antagonistic or both. Judaism, he asserted, needs to stipulate 'virtually no dogmas and to demand nothing but that people live according to the law [. . .]. [T]he question of where the authority of doctrine comes from was not resolved but rather removed as soon as the *Haggadah* element had dissociated itself completely from the *Halachah* element'.[19] Such a dissociation never even remotely came to pass. Walter Benjamin, while not much more Jewishly informed than Adorno, was at least astute enough to solicit Scholem's translation of Bialik's relevant, clarifying essay '*Halakhah* and *Aggadah*' 'as soon as possible'.[20] Benjamin's letter to Scholem, four years later, suggests that he had come to understand the distinction rather more precisely than did Adorno. 'Kafka's genius [wrote Benjamin] lay in the fact that he tried something altogether new; he gave up truth so that he could hold on to its transmissibility, the haggadic element [. . .]. [His parables] don't simply lie down at the feet of doctrine, the way *Haggadah* lies down at the feet of *Halakhah*'.[21]

Let me adduce another example. In his critique of the revised edition of Ernst Bloch's *Spuren*, Adorno, with no little chutzpah, asserted the following:

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[15] "Gruß an Gershom G. Scholem" for his 70th birthday, 5 December 1967 (trans. F. Hener).

[16] For an excellent treatment of this question see Rabinbach, '"Why were the Jews sacrificed?"'.

[17] '"*Bilderverbot*" Meets Body', 294 note 9.

[18] 'Notes on Kafka,' in *Prisms*, 271.

[19] 'Reason and Revelation', 140.

[20] This rather gorgeous essay memorably makes the point precisely that there can be no dissociation between Halakhah and Aggada. This was a point that needn't be made to anyone with an adequate understanding of Jewish tradition. For Benjamin's request, see Scholem (ed.), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, 134 (letter of 11 August 1934).

[21] Letter of 12 June 1938. I cite from the translation in Eiland et al. (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 326.

> Bloch is a mystic in the paradoxical sense that he has achieved a synthesis of theology and atheism. In contrast, the mystical meditations in which the tradition of the divine spark had its roots, *presupposed dogmatic teachings which they then set out to destroy by some novel interpretation*; this was true of both the Jewish tradition of the Torah as a sacred text and of the Christological tradition.[22]

It is hard to see how this statement can be defended. As if that apodictic error were not enough, he could also be blithely condescending towards Jewish life. 'A Jewish poet [Soma Morgenstern] once wrote quite rightly that a village air suffuses Judaism and Christianity'.[23]

It is worth adding that, in Adorno's hyper-aestheticized worldview, artists are heroes, but, of course, this applies only to certain sorts of artists. His named heroes, preeminently Kafka and Proust, were assimilated Jews whose Jewishness took the form of a heritage rather than a life. The case of Kafka becomes central in the saga of his kabbalah, and can be set aside for the moment. Proust, for his part, was unparalleled in Adorno's esteem.

> Only by reaching the acme of genuine individualization, only by obstinately following up the desiderata of its concretion, does the work become truly the bearer of the universal. I will call the name of an artist of our time who followed this axiom to an extreme, who as many believe made a spleen of concretion, but thus achieved a degree of universality which I think unsurpassed in modern literature. I am thinking of the work of Marcel Proust.[24]

For Adorno, 'a village air suffuses Judaism' while Proust is the 'acme of genuine individualization'. In other words, traditionally practiced Judaism is provincial, while the secular, assimilated Jew is universal.

Adorno's "Jewish" interest as perhaps best known was expressed in his (anti-?) slogan, "no poetry after Auschwitz". Even here he could be disturbingly insensitive. Jeremy Adler makes this point in connection with his father, H. G. Adler (1910–1988), the survivor of and chronicler of Theresienstadt, who was stigmatized by Adorno. 'Through its dialectical sniping against the religious beliefs which sustained H. G. Adler in the camps, which Adorno ridicules as a "*Schützengrabenreligion*" ["trench religion"], his critique turns into an unintended attack on Judaism, too'.[25]

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[22] 'Bloch's Traces: The Philosophy of Kitsch', 59 (emphasis added).
[23] 'Reason and Revelation', 141.
[24] 'Theses Upon Art and Religion Today', 681.
[25] Adler, '"The one who got away"', 18–19, at p. 19.

Rabinbach finds an analogous problem in the 'Elements of Antisemitism' section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. '[The] "Elements of Enlightenment", it might be argued, ultimately holds the Jews accountable for their own fate'.[26] It can hardly be surprising that Scholem reacted strongly, if privately, to Adorno's conflicted relationship to Judaism. In Scholem's personal copy of the first edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, now held in the Scholem Library at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, there are several pointed exclamations, none of which are approbative.[27] Scholem informed his correspondent George Lichtheim that he had read the book twice and disagreed with its assessment of anti-Semitism.[28] Indeed, one can only imagine what Scholem made of another remark made by Adorno: 'One might well ask, in a variation on the Kabbalistic saying, whether the country that drove its Jews out did not lose as much as the Jews did'.[29] To first rely on some unidentified 'Kabbalistic saying' and, second, make the point that Germans lost as much as did the Jews is doubly perverse, and would seem to have been doubly offensive to Scholem. Such offense is striking for a philosopher so celebrated for his reflections on the *Shoah* that his editor titled a compendium of his philosophy *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*.[30]

I would add that Adorno also universalized the *Shoah* in a way that, at least according to some Jewish sensibilities, robs it of its Jewish particularity. The title of the last section, the eighteenth of eighteen lectures on *Metaphysics*, is 'Metaphysics after Auschwitz'.[31] By the time of its composition, Auschwitz had already become popularized as a metaphor for modernity. It is not for this reason, however, that it was dialectically necessary for Adorno to couple kabbalah with a (by this point almost ceremonial) invocation of Auschwitz. Auschwitz, in other words, is not taken as the site of slaughter, but as a general notion, equated with Viet-

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[26] Rabinbach, '"Why were the Jews sacrificed?"', 145.

[27] Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. In the margins of p. 207, he exclaimed, in German, 'welch Geschwätz!' ('what twaddle!'); on p. 298 he wrote, in Hebrew, '*ayzeh pitpoot!*' ('what babble!'); on p. 220, in reference to the beginning sentence of section VI of 'Elemente des Antisemitismus,' ('Der Antisemitismus beruht auf falscher Projektion'), Scholem wrote 'Der echteste Adorno' ('the most authentic Adorno').

[28] Scholem (to Lichtheim 21 October 68) says he read *Dialektik der Aufklärung* and disagreed on its treatment of anti-Semitism (*Briefe II*, 216).

[29] Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, 73.

[30] Tiedemann (ed.), *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*.

[31] For the queasiness evoked by Adorno's (over)use of the Auschwitz metaphor, see Alex Ross' trenchant 'Ghost Sonata: Adorno and German Music'.

nam and even with the "end of metaphysics". 'Through Auschwitz—by that I mean not only Auschwitz but the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam—through all this the concept of metaphysics has been changed to its innermost core'.[32]

1.3. *Adorno's Turn to Kabbalah*

On the other hand, Adorno explained himself (in arguably fundamental ways) on the basis of (at least nominally) Jewish tradition. In fact, it has been suggested that 'the whole problematic of the incommunicable and incommensurable experience of the non-identical, around which the writings of Adorno and Benjamin circle, is inescapably derived from the Jewish contrast between the Adamic tongue and the fallen state of language'.[33] He was often to draw this distinction between a pure kabbalistic theology of language and the corrupt language of the contemporary society. Unredeemed language, for Adorno, is a reified expression of the cultural industry, 'a sanctified abracadabra'.[34] There is yet hope, perhaps, and that hope apparently descended, for him, from a Jewish name-mysticism. 'What would be other, the no longer perverted essence, refuses a language that bears the stigmata of existence—there was a time when theology spoke of the mystical name'.[35] Adorno could find this in the poetry of Rudolf Borchardt, a poet who was, in fact, deeply conflicted about his own Jewish identity. 'Substance crystallizes in language as such, as though it were the authentic language Jewish mysticism speaks of'.[36] The concluding sentence of his Kafka essay—to be discussed more fully below—makes this same claim in other terms: 'The name alone, revealed through a natural death, not the living soul, vouches for that in man which is immortal'.[37]

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[32] Tiedemann (ed.), *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, 101.

[33] Rolf Tiedemann, as summarized in Matt Connell, 'Imagining Adorno', 139. On the primordial language in general culture, see Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*. For the perfect language in kabbalistic sources, see Idel, 'A la recherche de la langue originelle', 415–442.

[34] Adorno, 'Lyric Poetry and Society', 62.

[35] Modified translation from *Negative Dialectics* by de Vries, '"The Other Theology"', 788.

[36] 'Charmed Language: On the Poetry of Rudolf Borchardt', 193. Adorno edited the Borchardt poetry, for which this served as an introduction.

[37] 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, 271.

Moreover, Adorno embraced the *Bilderverbot* not only as last things but also as first principle. His full statement of this principle is worth citing at some length.

> In Jewish religion, in which the idea of the patriarchate culminates in the destruction of myth, the bond between name and being is still recognized in the ban on pronouncing the name of God. The disenchanted world of Judaism conciliates magic by negating it in the idea of God. Jewish religion allows no word that would alleviate the despair of all that is mortal. It associates hope only with the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as the infinite, lies as truth. The guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is the knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion.[38]

With 'X-ray eyes' to see into 'hidden content', 'hidden puzzles as transparent as the Cabalists of old tried to make the Torah'.[39]

While, then, he did sometimes assert Jewish sources for his thought, Adorno more frequently and more influentially de-Judaized kabbalah much as he de-particularized Auschwitz. The record seems clear: Adorno characterized neither kabbalah nor Auschwitz in Jewish terms; certainly, hurtful implications did not impede him. Under Adorno's own dialectical laws, however, it may now be permitted to note that this silence took back with one hand what it gave with the other. On balance, Adorno's Judaism is clear enough. Judaism as lived, *any* non-kabbalistic Judaism, loses out; the negative swallows the positive; non-identity obviates Jewish identity in any of its publicly recognizable forms.

1.4. *Adorno and Scholem*

Relations between Adorno and Scholem should provide, in a fundamental sense, the key to the present effort, but this friendship is still poorly understood. A book should be written on this puzzlingly understudied subject. One hundred and twenty-one letters are found in the Adorno folder of Scholem's archive; an annotated edition of this correspondence would make a good start.[40] The full story of the triangulation between Scholem, Benjamin, and Adorno, an even bigger saga, of course lies necessarily beyond the scope of this modest contribution.

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[38] Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 23.

[39] *Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, as cited in Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew*, 52.

[40] 'G. Scholem—Archives: Arc. 4o 1599', Archives, Jewish National Library at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I thank the archive staff for their kind support of my research. We have the edition of Adorno's letters to Scholem on the subject of Walter Benjamin: Adorno, 'Um Benjamins Werk', 143–185.

The short of it is that the philosopher of critical theory was extraordinarily indebted to the scholar of kabbalah and respected him unequivocally. Adorno introduced Scholem at the 1957 Loeb Lectures, during the summer session at the University of Frankfurt, for which an announcement was printed: 'Scholem is without question the most important today living connoisseur of the kabbalah, not only a scholar of world-wide reputation, but at the same time possessing speculative philosophical power of extraordinary stature'.[41]

Adorno no doubt saw himself as a peer of Scholem's *philosophisch-spekulativer Kraft*. He also, without question, identified with the putatively heretical implications of Scholem's life-project. The philosopher put his finger on this shared heretical imperative more than once, though he never sustained it at any one location in his work. 'The insatiable demythologization of the divine whose echo we constantly hear in the tremulous tones of deeply troubled questioning chains the divine in mystical heresy to anyone who relates to it'.[42]

It is fair to say that Adorno enjoyed the support of none other than Gershom Scholem himself in his de-Judaization of kabbalah—no small irony there. Such, after all, was the shared de-particularizing feature of their respective "negative theology". To be absolutely clear, I am not saying that Scholem's primary lifework on kabbalah did anything other than reclaim it for the Jewish people, as an act of professedly Zionist science. He was, however, ultimately a professed anarchist as well, and at bottom saw kabbalah as the Jewish expression of an ultimately disarticulated abyss. Scholem was consciously dialectical in this as in all matters, and so insisted to Adorno that he, Scholem, was equally open to the orthodox as much as to the heterodox. In fact, in a letter of 8 December 1967, Scholem chided Adorno for his undialectical attitude toward Judaism. In any case, for present purposes it suffices to note that Adorno deferred to Scholem for a shared, happily heretical 'insatiable demythologization of the divine'.

There is, then, little question that Adorno had a *kind* of theology, so called, and there is no doubt that he exploited Scholem's construction of kabbalah to articulate that theology. However, it is also the case that all positive forms of religious expression—myth, ritual, magic—remained

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[41] 'Scholem ist ohne Frage der bedeutendste heute lebende Kenner der Kabbala, nicht nur ein Gelehrter von Weltruf, sondern zugleich eine philosophisch-spekulative Kraft außerordentlichen Ranges' ('Scholem spricht in den "Loeb Lectures"', in: *Gesammelte Schriften* 20.2, *Vermischte Schriften II*, 477–478).

[42] *The Jargon of Authenticity*, reprinted in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, 171–172.

baseless and invidious for him. Nor least of all, he simply despised occultism, which, among other things, he saw as discursively related to fascism, as indeed it has historically tended to be.[43] Adorno's sustained studies on astrology are closely related to his culture industry critique.[44] More importantly, however, was his participation in *The Authoritarian Personality*, where the political rhetoric of authoritarianism in relation to irrational religious belief is set forth at length.[45]

2. *Aphoristik, Odradek, and a Cult of Kafka*

2.1. *"Kafka's Odradek Might Almost Be an Angel"*

Dialectics between Adorno and Scholem can be gauged in a comparison of their respective aphorisms, which "theses" must be read as parts of a shared discourse. Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History', sometimes referred to as 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', was finished in 1940.[46] Scholem's 'Thesen über den Begriff der Gerechtigkeit', ('Theses on the Concept of Justice', 1919/1925) may have provided the original stimulus for Benjamin's subsequent use of this literary form.[47] The "theses" form was subsequently adopted by Adorno and Scholem. Adorno's first published 'Theses Against Occultism' in *Minima Moralia*, written 1946–1947, but not published till 1951.[48] Scholem's 'Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah' (*Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala*) was first published in 1958, and amplified in 1973.[49]

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[43] The specter of fascism is never far from his thoughts on occultism. He directly makes the association with regard to the proto-fascist Munich *Kosmiker* in: *Minima Moralia*, 67.

[44] 'The Psychological Technique'. Horkheimer & Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; Adorno, 'Stars Down to Earth'.

[45] Frenkel-Brunswick et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*.

[46] A review of the complicated publication history can now be found in Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 17–22.

[47] The text is published for the first time, with English translation and analysis, in Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*, 174–184. Jacobson, p. 174, suggests that in fact "the first [of them] were appearing to be a direct commentary on Benjamin's notes on the category of justice. Löwy, on the other hand, suggests the influence of Scholem's "theses" on those subsequently written by Benjamin. See *Fire Alarm*, 21.

[48] *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 1951); English trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott, and again in English in *Telos* 19 (1974), 7–12; reprinted in Adorno, *The Stars down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, with an introduction by S. Cook, 128–134.

[49] First published in *Geist und Werk, aus der Werkstatt unserer Autoren; zum 75. Geburtstag von Dr. Daniel Brody*, 209–215; reprinted with added conclusion in Scholem, *Judaica 3:*

The triangulation between these three sets of theses was sustained and highly complex. Benjamin sent a version to Scholem in spring 1940.[50] Adorno published this version in 1945, and sent the publication to Scholem, who responded that they were 'in truth an encoded will and testament that only a poetic metaphysician like Edgar Allen Poe could come up with'.[51] Five years or so after reading Benjamin's theses, in 1946 or 1947, Adorno composed his own 'Theses against Occultism'. Adorno again sent his publication to Scholem. Scholem published the first version of his 'Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms' in 1958, which can be seen in a sense as Scholem's final response to the theses of Benjamin and Adorno.[52]

In his 1967 'Salute' for Scholem's seventieth birthday, Adorno spoke explicitly if inaccurately of Scholem's 'aphorisms'.

> [Scholem] himself, commonly not reticent, tends to talk about his true intentions with extreme reserve, almost secretively. Moments of direct religious communication in his writings, with the exception of the *Theses on Messianism* [*sic*] perhaps, are rare. That garnered occasional criticism, that he withdrew to a position of a distanced scholar in an area, which has by definition the highest requirements for the subjective experiences and speculations of those who deal in the subject. Those familiar with Scholem's oeuvre and himself know of the injustice of such accusations.[53]

Scholem responded in a letter dated 8 December 1967.

> I read your musings with the highest diligence, those from 30 years ago which weren't bad at all either, as well as the present ones. That you commend my insolemnity so much was especially delighting—it is precious to me. I suppose it corresponds to your dialectic attitude when I say that I do not just have a soft spot for the heterodox but also a lot for the orthodox, and large parts of my writing are devoted to the attempt of establishing the connections between these two spheres in a dialectical manner. For although you are right when mentioning that I have had quite a bit to say about the secularization of mysticism and, going

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Studien zur jüdischen Mystik, 264–271. See also Biale, 'Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorism on Kabbalah', 67–93.

[50] Scholem sketches the chronology from his end in *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 221.

[51] Skinner (ed.), *Gershom Scholem, A Life in Letters*, 326.

[52] In 1963 Scholem contributed an essay (on eighteenth-century Sabbatian nihilism) for a volume honoring Adorno's sixtieth birthday: *Zeugnisse: Theodor W. Adorno zum sechzigsten Geburtstag*, edited by Max Horkheimer.

[53] 5 December 1967 [translation by F. Heuer], reprinted in: *Gesammelte Schriften* 20.2, *Vermischte Schriften II*, 482–83.

> further, religion, apart from this it should not be kept under silence that I do not hold secularization itself to be something final but something undergoing constant change. You know very well that I am anything but an atheist, and that my religious conviction is very closely linked to my historical insights. You yourself hint at it in a later sentence. As regards a remark of yours: by 'theses of messianism' didn't you actually refer to the 'Unhistorical Aphorisms [*Sätze*] about Kabbala,' which I, very intentionally, hid in a very inaccessible place? For I cannot remember ever having published theses about messianism, some of which I have jotted down in my notebook in private.[54]

Adorno also drew metaphysical conclusions in the 1967 'Salute'.

> If I am not totally mistaken, Scholem became a historian of the Kabbala—the word itself means oral tradition [*Überlieferung*], thus implicating history—because he understood its contents to be in essence historical and therefore believed that its discussion had to be a historical one. This kind of historical truth can only be seized [*ergriffen werden*] at the furthest distance from its origins, that is, exactly in total secularization.[55]

2.2. *"Occultism Is the Metaphysic of Dunces"*[56]

Adorno admittedly possessed substantial knowledge neither of kabbalah nor of Judaism. He was also anti-esoteric, at least in a certain sense, and aggressively anti-occultist, in any sense.

Mandarin professorial snobbery is only partly accountable for his sneering tone. He certainly believed that the "half-learned"—a concept apparently taken from Max Weber without acknowledgement—were responsible for the depredations of occultism. 'The life-style of belated bohemianism forced on the non-academic philosopher is itself enough to give him a fatal affinity to the world of arts-and-crafts, crackpot religion and half-educated sectarianism'.[57] In 'The Stars Come Down to Earth', he asserted aphoristically (and apodictically, again without reference to

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[54] Skinner translated only a portion of this letter in *Gershom Scholem, A Life in Letters*, 426. I thank Werner Brandl for help with some of the German. The original is found in *Briefe II* [letter #125].

[55] *Vermischte Schriften* II, 482–483. On *Ergriffenheit* see my *Religion after Religion*, 31–32, 121, 152–53.

[56] Adorno, 'Theses against Occultism', thesis 6, reprinted in Adorno, *The Stars down to Earth*, 130.

[57] From the section title 'Inside and outside' written in 1944; *Minima Moralia*, 67. I have treated the Weberian conception of lay intellectuals and their impact on religious change in *Between Muslim and Jew*, 212.

Weber) that 'the climate of semi-erudition is the fertile breeding-ground for astrology'.[58] Indeed, occult correspondences emerged as the broken signs of disconnection, of the primal disconnect between human and nature that marked the earliest disenchantment of the world. 'The disenchantment of the world is the extirpation of animism [. . .] The world becomes chaos, and synthesis salvation. There is said to be no difference between the totemic animal, the dreams of the ghost-seer, and the absolute idea'.[59]

'Astrology, although it sometimes pretends to be chummy with theology, is basically different from religion [. . .]. Much like culture industry, astrology tends to do away with the distinction of fact and fiction: its content is often over-realistic while suggesting attitudes which are based on an entirely irrational source'.[60] Astrology is to be distinguished from mysticism just as it is from religion in general. 'The comparison of astrology with religious mysticism, dubious in more than one respect, is invalid particularly in as much as the mystery celebrated by astrology is empty'.[61]

Adorno follows Benjamin, chronologically if not causatively, when he likewise mocked astrology and the occult sciences. He was, in fact, at least as forceful—that is to say, nasty—as Adorno was in his critique. The occult sciences thus were a 'swindle', a product of the dissolution of general education, 'the withering of the humanities, the collapse of knowledge of the classical languages [. . .] the oleaginous gibberish of the false prophets [. . .] can easily be understood as a residue of the great philosophy of humanism'.[62] Benjamin held that 'the class struggle, which is always present to a historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist'.[63] His most penetrating critique of occultism accordingly concerned what he saw as its invariable pacification of this rightful struggle. 'What [occultists] promise the ordinary person is his elevation to a higher social class, whereas those who are

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[58] Adorno, *Stars down to Earth*, 45.

[59] Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 5. With characteristically brilliant overkill, the critical theorist lumps together Freud, Kant, and Hegel.

[60] Adorno, *Stars Down to Earth*, 42, 50.

[61] Adorno, *Stars Down to Earth*, 117.

[62] Eiland & Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 654–656.

[63] Thesis IV of the version of 'Theses' translated by Zohn in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 256.

already there are assured of the exclusive reality of the spirit and the meaninglessness of economic struggle'.[64] For Benjamin as for Adorno, then, commodification ruled the economics of occultism. Like Adorno he recognized a 'subterranean interplay between the newer techniques of advertising and the occult sciences. If one of them has mastered the art of transforming the commodity into an arcanum, the other is able to sell the arcanum as a commodity'.[65]

The most famous lines of all the aforementioned 'Theses' were, fittingly, the final ones from Benjamin's pen.

> We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter.[66]

It is essential, however, to recall that Benjamin's thoughts on 'the mimetic faculty' and 'the doctrine of the similar'—two short pieces written in 1933 that remained unpublished in his lifetime, and are now the fountainhead of commentaries galore—cherished astrological "mimesis" as origins for cultural evolution, primordially prior to the depredations of class inequity. Beginning with 'the horoscope as an originary totality [. . .] these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, formerly the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language'.[67] Adorno, in other words, diverged from Benjamin not on the primal potency of mimesis but more fundamentally in the valuation of that power.

By contrast, nothing shows how far apart Adorno was from Scholem than their respective comments on the astral body.

> In place of the interaction that even the most rigid philosophy admitted, the astral body is installed, ignominious concession of hypostasized spirit to its opponent. Only in the metaphor of the body can the concept of

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[64] Eiland & Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 654.

[65] Ibid., 656 [1932].

[66] I have modified the translation published at www.tasc.ac.uk/depart/media/staff/ls/WBenjamin/CONCEPT2.html (accessed 30 April 2006). He recapitulated the same point in the final words of his 'On Tradition'.

[67] Ibid., 695, 722. Here I elide passages from the two texts, which were written some months apart.

> pure spirit be grasped at all, and is at the same time cancelled. In their reification the spirits are already negated [. . .]. They inveigh against materialism. But they want to weigh the astral body.[68]

This, before Scholem gave his Eranos lecture on '*Tselem:* The Concept of the Astral Body'.[69] Without entering into arcane details, suffice it to say that Scholem saw the encounter with the astral body as 'the ultimate initiation experience into the world of esoteric knowledge'.[70]

In any case, Adorno remained militantly opposed to "occultism" and made some extraordinary claims concerning its perceived threat. 'The hypnotic power exerted by things occult resembles totalitarian terror: in present-day processes the two are merged'.[71] 'Astrology, and occultism as a whole, has [. . .] a strong urge to overcome suspicions of magical practices in a rationalized business culture. Science is the bad conscience of occultism and the more irrational the justification of its pretenses, the more it is stressed that there is nothing phony about it'.[72]

It must be remembered that the dialectic tipped back to the direction from which it came. That is to say, the "occult" plays a not necessarily negative role in the respective theses of Scholem and Benjamin. Benjamin, for example, published his essay on surrealism in *Literarische Welt* in 1929. Here he allows for a 'serious exploration of occult, surrealistic, phantasmagoric gifts and phenomena' as a paradigm for his 'profane illumination'.[73] And Scholem's ninth thesis begins 'Ganzheiten sind nur okkult tradierbar'.[74] He was hardly uninterested in this subject scholastically; his substantial 'studies in demonology' have now been gathered in a Hebrew language volume.[75] Benjamin and Scholem clearly did not agree with Adorno that 'occultism is the metaphysics of dunces'.[76]

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[68] 'Theses against Occultism', theses 6 and 7.

[69] For Adorno's eighth "thesis", regarding the astral body, see *Stars Down to Earth*, 132. Scholem's lecture was not published in the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* and first appeared in *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, and in English as 'Tselem: The Concept of the Astral Body', in: *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 251–273, 312–319.

[70] *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 272.

[71] 'Theses against Occultism', as translated in *The Stars Down to Earth*, 129.

[72] *The Stars Down to Earth*, 94.

[73] Eiland & Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 216.

[74] These *Ganzheiten* should be read in light of the tradition of "totality" traced by Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*.

[75] Scholem, *Shedim, ruhot, u-neshamot: mehkarim be-demonologyah*.

[76] 'Theses against Occultism', 130.

2.3. *Odradek*

Scholem wrote his 'Gruß vom Angelus' for the 15 July 1921 birthday of Walter Benjamin; Benjamin quotes that poem in his '*Thesen*'; and Adorno wrote his 'Gruß an Gershom G. Scholem for the 70th birthday: 5 December 1967'.[77]

At the heart of their sanctification of Franz Kafka lies curled the bizarre figure of Odradek. Odradek was a mysterious creature described in an especially uncanny parable written by Kafka, 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters' ('The Cares of a Family Man'). In his fourth 'thesis against occultism', Adorno responded to Benjamin's reading of the mysterious Odradek.

> The offal of the phenomenal world becomes, to sick consciousness, the *mundus intelligibilis*. It might almost be speculative truth, just as Kafka's *Odradek might almost be an angel*, and yet it is, in a positivity that excludes the medium of thought, only barbaric aberration alienated from itself, subjectivity mistaking itself for its object.[78]

Adorno misreads Benjamin, however. Benjamin's Odradek might have been an angel to him, but the creature was also, he wrote, 'the most singular bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt'.[79] Benjamin noted that Odradek laughs, yes, 'but it is only the kind of laughter that has no lungs behind it. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation'.[80]

Benjamin had glossed Odradek in his 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death'.[81] Benjamin's essay on Kafka had benefited from Scholem's sternly worded suggestions. Adorno responded to this article in a long letter dated 17 December 1934. Adorno here called

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[77] ('Salute to Gershom G. Scholem on his 70th birthday: 5 December 1967'). Reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften* 20.2, 'Vermischte Schriften II', 478–487.

[78] 'Theses against Occultism', 130, emphasis added. On "offal" see the distasteful exchange with H. G. Adler, reported by Adler's son Jeremy Adler, in the latter's 'The One Who Got Away', 18–19.

[79] Eiland & Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 810.

[80] For Benjamin's cohort "rustling" denoted a wildness heard in wilderness, the uncanny meaning caught primordially in forest movement. I have gathered some materials in this connection. See 'A Rustling in the Wood', modified and expanded in *Religion after Religion*, 112–124. Ernst Cassirer used the motif and would have been accessible to Benjamin. I agree with Hanssen in this connection: 'Despite his dislike of Cassirer's neo-Kantian framework, Benjamin may well have taken note of his influential *Language and Myth* (1925)' (Hanssen, 'Language and Mimesis in the Work of Walter Benjamin', 65).

[81] In: Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, 111–140, at 116 and 132–134.

Odradek 'the other face of the world of things'.[82] Scholem invoked virtually the same image, the 'nothingness' that is the 'second face' of the world, in his greatest poem, '*In Media Vita*', which he wrote sometime between 1930 and 1933.[83] At the end of that period, Scholem sent two other major poems to Benjamin in the space of a year, one on the 'Angelus' (19 September 1933) and one on the 'Trial' (9 July 1934). Adorno observed in his 'Notes on Kafka' that 'Benjamin viewed [Odradek] as an angel in Klee's style', thereby explicitly linking the two poems.[84] The second, longer and stronger of the two is the only prayer known to have been written by Scholem. He found Kafka's *Trial* to be the trial of God Himself: 'Your trial began on earth' ('Dein Process begann auf Erden'). In short, the triangulation between Benjamin, Adorno, and Scholem was tight and acute.

Adorno and Scholem's 1966 joint edition of Benjamin's *Briefe* resurrected their mutual friend from temporary oblivion. That resurrection was, in the first instance, a philological act. Kafka composed 'Cares' in the flat atonality of philology, cast as "studies" on the meaning of the foreign word Odradek.

Scholem concluded the tenth of his 'Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms' with a kind of apotheosis of Kafka. 'Although unaware of himself, [Kafka's] writings are a secularized representation of the Kabbalistic conception of the world. This is why many of today's readers find something of the rigorous splendor of the canonical in them—a hint of the Absolute that breaks into pieces'.[85] The kabbalah scholar added this conclusion, it is important to note, between the first publication of the aphorisms, in 1958, and their reprinting in 1973. In the intervening years, he also co-edited Benjamin with Adorno, which edition included the Benjamin-Scholem exchanges on Kafka. In the tenth aphorism, Scholem also cited the thirtieth aphorism in Kafka's 'Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way'. In 'a certain sense the Good is comfortless' ('in gewissem Sinne trostlos'). To properly appreciate this potently located citation of Kafka in the final version of Scholem's aphorisms, it is necessary to recall their triangulated conversation on just this point. In short, Adorno's ostensibly kabbalistic Kafka, and especially his Odradek, cannot be understood outside his interdependence

[82] Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, 69.
[83] Scholem, *Fullness of Time*, 97.
[84] In *Prisms*, 243–271, at 263.
[85] Translated in Grözinger, *Kafka and Kabbalah*, 1.

with Benjamin and Scholem concerning their cult's saint, Franz Kafka. These three created, especially in their respective 'theses', Kafka as a canonical anarchism; a perfect oxymoron; an oxymoron of perfection; a completeness as emptiness: a completely empty fullness.

2.4. *The Music of Glorification: Grass Angels*

In *Doktor Faustus*, Thomas Mann invokes 'music, that curiously cabbalistic craft'.[86] In light of Adorno's acknowledged contributions to the making of *Doktor Faustus*—Mann even wrote a companion booklet detailing Adorno's role (partly to address Adorno's distress at a perceived insufficient credit)—it is at least reasonable to speculate that Mann took such a characterization from Adorno.

Adorno himself did develop a kind of musicological kabbalah, especially later in life. For example, in Mahler's music, according to Adorno, 'the outbreak, from the place it has escaped from, appears as savage: the anti-civilizational impulse as musical character. Such moments evoke the doctrine of Jewish mysticism that interprets evil and destructiveness as scattered manifestations of the dismembered divine power'.[87] He suggested that Arnold Schönberg's background may account in part for his music, speculating 'that the descendent of a family of Bratislava Jews living in the Leopoldstadt, and anything but fully emancipated, was not wholly free of that subterranean mystical tradition to be found in many of his contemporaries of similar origins, men such as Kraus, Kafka and Mahler'.[88]

He could even discern in the cadences of *Kultur* the strains of kabbalah. Thus, in 1959, in the ultimate monument of *Kultur*, Goethe's *Faust*.

> The chosen people is Jewish, just as the image of beauty in the third act is Greek. If the carefully selected designation '*Chorus mysticus*' in the closing stanza means anything beyond the vague clichés of Sunday metaphysics, then the content, whether Goethe intended it or not, alludes to Jewish mysticism. The Jewish inflection of the ecstasy, enigmatically built into the text, motivates the movement of the spheres of the heaven that opens out above forest, cliff, and desert waste.[89]

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[86] From the Lowe-Porter translation (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948), 149. See now the superior Hughes translation. Mann employed a kabbalistically colored version of the angel Samael both in *Joseph* and in *Faustus*. I hope to return to this question on another occasion.

[87] Adorno, *Mahler*, 51, as cited in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, 244.

[88] Adorno, 'Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*', 232. This essay was dedicated in 1963 to Gershom Scholem.

[89] 'On the Final Scene of Faust', 114.

Adorno heard in Goethe's *Chorus Mysticus* not some generic kabbalah, but, strikingly, 'the cries of a Hassidic voice, exclamations from the Cabalistic potency of *gevurah*'.[90]

Adorno's comments on the music of kabbalah reach their crescendo, so to speak, in Beethoven. In notes for his major Beethoven opus, unpublished in his lifetime, Adorno thundered on about the salvific connection between mysticism and music. 'Hope is always secret, because it is not "there"—it is the basic category of mysticism and the highest category of Beethoven's metaphysics [. . .]. [H]ope in Beethoven is decisive as a secularized though not a neutralized mystical category [. . .] an image of hope without the lie of religion'.[91] He ascends from there towards a peculiar, and peculiarly apt, climax.

> *Beethoven and the doctrine of the Cabbala, according to which evil arose from the excess of divine power (Gnostic motif). Relate the end of my study to the teaching of Jewish mysticism* about the grass angels, who are created for an instant only to perish in the sacred fire. Music—modeled on the glorification of God, even, and especially, when it opposes the world—resembles these angels. Their very transience, their ephemerality, is glorification. That is, the incessant destruction of nature. Beethoven raised this figure to musical self-consciousness. His truth is the destruction of the particular. He composed to its end the absolute transience of music. The fire which, according to the stricture against weeping, is to be struck from a man's soul, is the 'fire which consumes [nature]' (Scholem, chapter on the *Zohar*, p. 86). Cf. Scholem, 85f.[92]

Scholem's grass angels certainly struck a transcendental chord in Adorno. '[The] notion of the instantly transient angels touched me in the deepest and most curious way. And one last thing: the connection between your concerns and Benjamin's has never been so clear to me as during this reading'.[93] As it turns out, Adorno misunderstood these "grass angels". Whether or not he understood them any better, Benjamin was equally delighted by the (ostensibly kabbalistic) image of transient, glorifying angels. 'The kabbalah relates that, at every moment, God creates a whole host of angels, whose only task before they return to the void is to appear before His throne for a moment and sing his praises'.[94] The music of angelic glorification seems inconceivably distant from Odradek.

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[90] 'On the Final Scene of Faust', 115.
[91] Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, 170–177, 242–245.
[92] *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, 176–177, emphasis added.
[93] As cited in *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, 245.
[94] 'Agesilaus Santander (Second Version)', in: Eiland & Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 714.

3. *Metaphysics*

Steven Aschheim rightly observes that a '"metaphysical" universe of discourse may be one more reason why, despite their many differences, Scholem and Adorno were able to find common ground in a species of "negative dialectics" and the suspicion of premature positivity'.[95]

The first observation that Adorno made on kabbalah in his 1939 letter concerned its neoplatonic/gnostic character. He returned to this theme some years later. On 29 July 1965 he delivered a lecture on metaphysics under the title 'Metaphysical Experience'. He began with mystical experience. Here he backed away from any unambiguous embrace of mystical sympathies and, indeed, denied any putative primordiality of 'primal religious experiences'.

> [D]escriptions of fundamental mystical experiences by no means have the primary, immediate quality one might expect, but are very strongly mediated by education.[96] For example, the intricate interrelationships between Gnosticism, Neoplatonism and the Cabbala and late Christian mysticism gave rise to an area of historicity which is equal to any in the history of dogma. And it is certainly no accident that the corpus in which the documents of Jewish mysticism are brought together more or less disconnectedly, the Cabbala, bears the title of tradition.[97]

Adorno returned to kabbalistic themes late in life, in letters, lectures, and essays written in his final decade. As he did so, he related them increasingly to his "negative dialectics".

> [. . .] the indifference of the temporal world and ideas, which has been asserted throughout metaphysics [hints of which are found] in heretical theology—that is to say, in mystical speculation, which has always been essentially heretical and has occupied a precarious position within institutional religions. I am thinking here of the mystical doctrine—which is common to the Cabbala and to Christian mysticism such as that of Angelus Silesius—of the infinite relevance of the intra-mundane, and thus the historical, to transcendence, and to any possible conception of transcendence.[98]

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[95] Aschheim, 'The Metaphysical Psychologist', 903–933, at 925.

[96] Steven T. Katz is known for this point, the so-called "conservative theory" of mystical experience. As is evident here, he was not the first to think of it, nor is it intrinsically "conservative".

[97] Adorno, *Metaphysics*, 138.

[98] *Metaphysics*, 100.

This observation was put to the service of questioning 'the possible status of what might be called *metaphysical experience* today'.[99] Having pressed that question, he discovered 'no possible treatment of [metaphysical experience] other than the dialectical one'.

> It has been observed that mysticism—whose very name expresses the hope that institutionalization may save the immediacy of metaphysical experience from being lost altogether—establishes social traditions and comes from tradition, across the lines of demarcation drawn by religions that regard each other as heretical. Cabbala, the name of the body of Jewish mysticism, means tradition. In its farthest ventures, metaphysical immediacy did not deny how much of it is not immediate.[100]

This was as close as Adorno came to articulating a theology (of sorts), which he had been iterating in a variety of valences, particularly in these final years of his life. He stressed that kabbalah was not a sign of his attachment to any ongoing Jewish tradition. Rather, it marked his rejection of it. In the 1965 lecture he put it almost bluntly. 'The only way a fruitful thinking can save itself is by following the injunction: "Cast away, that you may gain"'.[101] A year later he marked the point yet more strongly. 'Whoever seeks to avoid betraying the bliss which tradition still promises in some of its images and the possibilities buried beneath its ruins must abandon that tradition which turns possibilities and meanings into lies. Only that which inexorably denies tradition may once again retrieve it'.[102] Replacing the word "tradition" with "kabbalah"—not unwarranted in as much as kabbalah is properly translated as "tradition"—here is Adorno's kabbalah in a nutshell.

4. *Odd Angels: In Lieu of a Conclusion*

Adorno could, with almost pinpoint precision—or surgical accuracy, depending on your cliché—skewer occultist irrationalism. 'Insistence on the cosmic secret hidden beneath the outer shell, in reverently omitting to establish the relation between the two, often enough confirms by just

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[99] *Metaphysics*, 100.
[100] *Negative Dialectics*, 372.
[101] *Metaphysics*, 101.
[102] 'On Tradition', 82 (unidentified translator). Originally published in *Inselalmanach auf das Jahr 1966* and now found in *Gesammelte Schriften* X.1, 310–320.

this omission that the shell has its good reasons that must be accepted without asking questions'.[103]

Adorno used mystical materials as grist for his dialectical mill, exactly as he accused Bloch of just such exploitation.

> Bloch's philosophy of appearance, for which [revealed] authority is irretrievably *passé*, no more fears the consequences of this than did the latter-day mystics of the great religions in their enlightened end-phase. He does not postulate religion in order to construct a philosophy of religion. The contortions this leads to form the subject of his own speculations. But he would rather put up with them, he would rather think of his own philosophy as mere semblance, than lapse either into positivism or into a positive religious faith. The vulnerability this form of thought so diligently displays is a consequence of its substance. If the latter were to be perfected and represented in all its purity, then the world of appearances, in which it has its being, would be conjured away into thin air.[104]

Adorno, in any case, concluded that estrangement itself, in its very distance, alone reveals the "cosmic secret". 'This kind of historical truth can only be seized at the furthest distance from its origins, that is, exactly in total secularization'.[105] If truth can and perhaps must arrive from these farthest commentarial reaches—say, you-the-reader on Adorno on Benjamin on Kafka on Odradek—then Adorno's very estrangement from Judaism would have been paradoxically salutary for his expropriation of kabbalah. Estrangement was Adorno's alienation as absolute. 'Only what does not fit into this world is true'.[106] This could be said of Adorno himself, of course; and it certainly seems more than likely that he would have beheld the self-reflexive accuracy of his own aphorism. Only what does not fit into this world is Adorno; and his kabbalah rests on an abyss that, in its profoundly absent glow, verges on divinity itself. Adorno saw in kabbalah a bright reflection of these darkest thoughts. In this sense and not only in this sense his kabbalah was sacred, at the farthest remove from the profane that, for him, was occultism.

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[103] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 67.

[104] 'Bloch's Traces: The Philosophy of Kitsch', 59.

[105] See note 55 above.

[106] *Aesthetic Theory*, as cited by Bernstein, 'The Dead Speaking of Stones and Stars', 156.

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"AUTHORIZED GUARDIANS": THE POLEMICS OF ACADEMIC SCHOLARS OF JEWISH MYSTICISM AGAINST KABBALAH PRACTITIONERS

Boaz Huss

The modern academic study of Jewish mysticism was established in the early twentieth century, mostly by Gershom Scholem and his students at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The academic field of Jewish mysticism, which was based on Scholem's modernist, Zionist, and Orientalist perspective, perceived kabbalah and other Jewish cultural formations as expressions of "Jewish mysticism", a vital, revolutionary force that enabled the national continuity of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. Scholem and his school, which valorized the metaphysical and historical significance of "Jewish mysticism" and the importance of its academic study, devalued and criticized contemporary, nonacademic students and practitioners of kabbalah. In this study I will examine the polemics of academic scholars against contemporary kabbalah practitioners, and analyze its social and cultural significance. I will suggest that the polemical stance of these academic scholars is an expression of the ideological and theological perspective of scholars engaged in the field of Jewish mysticism, who aspire not only to study kabbalah as a historical and sociological phenomenon, but also to determine its symbolic value and control its increasing cultural capital in the modern world. Using Scholem's own term, I will claim that the polemics of the modern scholars against contemporary kabbalists is an expression of their claim to be the "authorized guardians" of kabbalah in the modern world.

Before turning to examine the polemical stance of academic scholars of Jewish mysticism against contemporary kabbalah practitioners, it is important to briefly describe the history of kabbalah reception, and the emergence of academic scholarship in this field.

1. *The Reception of Kabbalah in the Modern Era*

Since the early thirteenth century various cultural formations—texts, oral traditions, and ritual practices—were (and still are) produced, transmitted, and perceived, as belonging to an ancient, sacred, body of

theoretical and practical knowledge, called "kabbalah". This varied and changing cultural formation gained considerable symbolic power in Jewish communities, first in Spain, and later in other Jewish centers around the world, as well as, since the late fifteenth century, amongst various Christian circles that developed Christian forms of kabbalah. Although kabbalah was criticized by some Jewish (as well as Christian) scholars during the late middle ages and the early modern period, it became universally accepted as sacred and authoritative in eighteenth-century Jewish cultures. Kabbalah retained its sacred and authoritative status during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mostly in East European, North African, and Middle Eastern Jewish communities, and it is still venerated as such in traditional Jewish circles today.

Yet, beginning in the late eighteenth century, both kabbalah and the traditional Jewish circles that adhered to it—mostly the east European *Hasidic* movement that emerged at the same period—were vehemently criticized by members of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, the "Haskalah".[1] Within the framework of building a modern, western, Jewish identity (constructed mainly on a Christian Protestant paradigm), the Maskilim sought to establish a Jewish culture whose past encompassed the Bible, classical Rabbinic Judaism and medieval philosophy, and whose present was identified with the Enlightenment movement. Some Maskilim contrasted this enlightened Judaism with a negative image of a backward, irrational, immoral, and oriental Judaism, which was identified with kabbalah and Hasidism.[2] Thus, for example, the Galician Maskil, Judah Leib Mises, in his work *Qin'at ha-Emet* ('Zeal for Truth', Vienna 1828) writes on contemporary East European Jews:

> You shall find another evil disease among them, an ancient leprosy that attaches itself to their souls, which serves as an adversary to the wise of heart who attempt to correct their beliefs and improve their ways. This evil is the belief implanted in their hearts involving many vain things, which they refer to by the names of "knowledge and wisdom of the kabbalah", as well as their powerful attachment to the sanctity of *Sefer ha-Zohar*.[3]

Most nineteenth-century Jewish scholarship of kabbalah was carried out from this negative perspective. The negative "enlightened" approach to kabbalah and Hasidism received its classic and most influential for-

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[1] On the Haskalah movement, see Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*.
[2] Huss, 'Admiration and Disgust', 205–207.
[3] Mises, *Qin'at ha-Emet*, 134.

mulation in the historiography of Heinrich Graetz, the leading historian of Judaism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

At the same period in which kabbalah lost its positive cultural value in Jewish enlightened circles (but retained it in traditional circles), its symbolic value increased amongst non-Jewish Romantic thinkers, who, in the context of the Romantic fascination with mysticism and oriental religions, found an interest in both Christian and Jewish kabbalah.[4] The outstanding spokesman for this tendency was the German theosophist Franz Molitor, who published his grand oeuvre on kabbalah, *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über Tradition*, in four volumes between 1827 and 1853. The symbolic value of kabbalah increased further in European culture in the second half of the nineteenth century and especially, in the *fin de siècle* era, as various western esoteric circles (such as Eliphas Levi and his circle in France, Vladimir Soloviev in Russia, the Order of the Golden Dawn in England, and the Theosophical Society in Europe, the United States, and India) valorized kabbalah as an ancient source of universal occult knowledge.

Following the growing interest in kabbalah in non-Jewish European culture, Jewish intellectuals in both Western and Eastern Europe reaffirmed the value of kabbalah and Hasidism. The re-evaluation of the kabbalah took place within the framework of a neo-Romantic perspective, the concern with mysticism, the occult, and the Orient which characterized the *fin de siècle* and the emergence of Jewish nationalist discourse which developed in close tandem with this neo-Romantic spirit. Jewish intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often combined a nascent Zionist-nationalist ideology with an attraction toward mysticism and the occult.[5] Thus, for instance, Naphtali Herz Imber, the author of the Zionist anthem *ha-Tikvah* ('Hope'), was in close relation with occultist and theosophical groups, and was highly interested in kabbalah.[6] Ernst Müller, who translated *Zohar* passages into German at the beginning of the twentieth century (and later published a book in English about the history of Jewish mysticism), was a member of the Zionist Student Union in Prague, as

[4] Schulte, 'Kabbala in der deutschen Romantik'; Kilcher, *Die Sprachthorie der Kabbala*, 239–327.

[5] Huss, 'Admiration and Disgust', 212–219.

[6] Kabakoff, *Master of Hope*, 12–15, 179.

well as a devotee of Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy.[7] Martin Buber turned his attention to Jewish mysticism in general and Hasidism in particular following his active participation in the Zionist movement, and his previous interest in Christian mysticism.[8]

It was against this background, and from a similar perspective, that Gershom Scholem decided to study kabbalah and that the modern, academic field of Jewish mysticism was established. In a 1974 interview Scholem related his decision to dedicate his life to the academic research of kabbalah:

> I wanted to enter into the world of *kabbalah* out of my belief in Zionism as a living thing—as the restoration of a people that had degenerated quite a bit. [. . .] I was interested in the question: Does halakhic Judaism have enough potency to survive? Is *halakhah* really possible without a mystical foundation? [. . .] I felt a certain sympathy, but I was also repulsed by many features of *kabbalah*. I did not, God forbid, think that that was truth, that was philosophy. But I thought it was worthwhile examining it also from a philosophical aspect. There were two levels I was interested in for the sake of arriving at an understanding of Judaism: "historiosophy"—the dialectic manifesting itself in spiritual processes, and the philosophical-metaphysical sphere. I tried to arrive at an understanding of what kept Judaism alive. I suppose I have some sort of predilection for mysticism. I never sneered at the mystics, and I do not share the view of those who do. They had a certain something that we lack.[9]

Scholem indeed attached great value to the cultural formations he recognized as being part of Jewish mysticism (although, as he indicates in the above quotation, he was also 'repulsed by many features of kabbalah').[10] Yet, while valorizing Jewish mysticism as a historical phenomenon and establishing its historical-philological study as a prestigious academic field, Scholem was critical and polemical (sometimes also sneering) in his attitude to contemporary, nonacademic students and followers of kabbalah.

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[7] See S. H. Bergman's introduction to Müller, *Der Sohar und seine Lehre*, 7–14; Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', 120–131, 147.

[8] Mendes-Flohr, 'Fin-de-siècle Orientalism', 77–132.

[9] Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 18–20.

[10] On Scholem's ambivalence toward kabbalah see: Anidjar, 'Jewish Mysticism Alterable and Unalterable', 90, 117; Raz-Krakotzkin, 'Between "Brit Shalom" and the Temple', 100; Huss, 'Ask No Questions', 154 note 29; idem, 'Admiration and Disgust', 233–234.

2. *Gershom Scholem's Attitude to Traditional Kabbalists of His Day*

During the same period in which Scholem investigated kabbalistic texts and created the foundations of the modern academic study of Jewish mysticism, kabbalah was studied and practiced in various traditional Jewish circles, mostly in East Europe and the Middle East. In fact, Jerusalem, where Scholem conducted his research after his immigration to Palestine in 1923, was the major center of traditional kabbalah at the beginning of the twentieth century. Alongside the most prestigious kabbalistic center since the late eighteenth century, *Yeshivat Bet-El*, kabbalah was studied in several newly founded *Yeshivot* such as *Porat Yoseph, Rehovot ha-Nahar, Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, and *Itur Rabanim*. The most prominent kabbalists of the twentieth century, R. Saul ha-Cohen Dweick, R. Judah Fatayah, R. Solomon Eliashov, and R. Judah Ashlag resided in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, Scholem ignored these living kabbalists almost completely in his academic work. Only rarely, and usually not in the context of his research, did Scholem mention contemporary kabbalists.[11] Scholem explicitly denied the historical and cultural significance of contemporary kabbalists, whom he described as 'out of touch with life':

> At the end of a long process of development in which Kabbalism, paradoxical though it may sound, has influenced the course of Jewish history, it has become again what it was in the beginning: the esoteric wisdom of small groups of men out of touch with life and without any influence on it.[12]

In his 1963 article 'On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in our Time', Scholem described the kabbalah of his day in terms of preservation and decadence: 'One can find in this generation a continuation of

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[11] A brief overview of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Jewish kabbalah is found in Scholem's article 'Kabbalah', in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (reprinted in Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 85). Scholem describes briefly contemporary Jerusalem Kabbalists in the context of his discussion of the kabbalistic book market in Jerusalem. See Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 169–170. In the 1974 interview mentioned above, Scholem briefly describes his impression of the Bet-El Kabbalists: 'Sometimes I would go to their prayer services, which were very impressive [. . .]. What remained of Bet-El was something like Yoga. I had the feeling that I was dealing with a group of Eretz Yisrael Jewish-style Yoga Practitioners' (Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 37–38). Scholem also referred to his meeting with one of Bet-El's kabbalists in the opening remarks of his 1949 lecture *Kabbalah and Myth* at the Eranos Conference in Ascona, Switzerland, printed in Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 87.

[12] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 34. And see Huss, 'Ask No Questions', 147.

earlier forms, in the sense of a precious living heritage, or one which has degenerated but nevertheless continues to exist in its external forms, even though it has lost its soul'.[13] Scholem did not only deny the historical significance of kabbalah in his days, but also its value as an original mystical expression: 'In the final analysis, one may say that there is no authentic original mysticism in our generation, either in the Jewish people or among the nations of the world'.[14]

As I have argued elsewhere,[15] Scholem's valorization of historical kabbalah, and his denial of the value of contemporary kabbalah is dependent on his modernist, Zionist, and Orientalist perspective. Scholem assumed that traditional kabbalah could not be a significant cultural factor in the modern world, because of the triumph of secularization. According to Scholem, the belief in the Torah as divine revelation (*Torah min ha-Shamayim*), which is fundamental to kabbalah, cannot be entertained in the modern world:

> This view was the culmination of the position of the Kabbalists in the earlier generations, and it was that which opened the gates to mysticism. There was an absolute belief here in something, but for many of us that very thing was a tremendous obstacle, if not an absolute obstacle. We do not believe in Torah from heaven [. . .]. It is this stumbling block which stands in the way of the formulation today of a Jewish mysticism bearing public significance.[16]

As stated above, Scholem perceived kabbalah (in contradistinction to Jewish legal tradition, the *Halacha*) as the vital force that enabled the national existence of Judaism in exile. According to Scholem, this vital, creative element was now invested in the Zionist project of nation building:

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[13] Scholem, *On The Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time*, 11 (based on a lecture given at Har-El Synagogue in Jerusalem, 1963; published in Hebrew in *Amot* 8 [1963], and reprinted in *Explications and Implications vol. 1* [*Devarim be-Go*, 1975], 71–83). There are, however, some exceptions to Scholem's disdain for the Jewish mysticism of his day. Later in the same article (11–13), Scholem mentions three contemporary phenomena that he found interesting: the Hasidism of R. Arele Roth, the Habad movement, and, especially, Rabbi Kook.

[14] Scholem, ibid., 6. Scholem continues and writes: 'It is clear that in recent generations there have been no awakenings of individuals leading to new forms of mystical teachings or to significant movements in public life. This applies equally well to Judaism, Christianity and Islam'.

[15] Huss, 'Ask No Questions', 141–158 (this article was translated from Hebrew by Joel A. Linseder. Some of the arguments that follow, as well as citations from Hebrew sources, are based on Mr. Linseder's translations).

[16] Scholem, ibid., 15.

> It is a basic fact that the creative element, drawing upon the authentic consciousness of this generation, has been invested in secular forms of building. This building or reconstruction of the life of the nation was and still is difficult, demanding energies of both will and execution, leaving little room for productive expression of traditional forms. This power includes much that would under different circumstances have been invested in the world of religious mysticism. This power has now been invested in things which are seemingly bereft of religious sanctity but are entirely secular, the most secular thing imaginable.[17]

Hence, Scholem's disregard and devaluation of contemporary kabbalists is dependent on his claim that it is the Zionist movement, and not traditional kabbalah, that continues the historical national role of Jewish mysticism.

Scholem regarded Jewish mysticism as the vital force of Judaism which made it possible for the Jewish tradition to persist in exile and, in a dialectical manner, ultimately led to Jewish Enlightenment and to Zionism.[18] He located the start of Jewish mysticism in the "Hekhalot" literature, which he assumed had been produced in Palestine and Babylonia in the first centuries CE, and regarded its conclusion in the establishment of the Bet-El Yeshiva in Jerusalem and the emergence of the Hasidic movement in East Europe, in the eighteenth century. As mentioned above, Scholem described East European Hasidim of his days, as well as the followers of the Lurianic kabbalah of the Bet El tradition in terms of preservation and decadence. In assigning positive value to Jewish mysticism as a significant historical phenomenon while devaluing its present-day manifestation, Scholem and his disciples enhanced the symbolic value of kabbalah and the cultural power of its modern scholars, while marginalizing the traditional bearers of kabbalistic tradition within emerging Israeli society.

3. *Scholem's Critique of Neo-Romantic Studies of Kabbalah*

Scholem, who denied the mystical value and historical significance of contemporary traditional kabbalah, was also critical of modern, western Jewish scholars of kabbalah. In his introduction to *Major Trends in*

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[17] Ibid., 17.

[18] See Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah, and Counter-History*, 162–163; Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past*, 163–164, 167; Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Nationalist Representation of the Diaspora*, 132.

Jewish Mysticism, published in 1941, Scholem chides nineteenth-century Jewish scholars of the Haskalah (such as Graetz, Zunz, Geiger, Luzatto, and Steinschneider), not only for their enlightened devaluation of kabbalah and Hasidism, but also for their lack of sufficient knowledge of the subject matter:

> We are well aware that their attitude, so far from being that of the pure scholar, was rather that of the combatant actively grappling with a dangerous foe [. . .]. Truth to tell, the most astonishing thing in reading the works of these critics is their lack of adequate knowledge of the sources or the subjects on which in many cases they ventured to pass judgment.[19]

In contrast, Scholem appreciated non-Jewish scholars such as Franz Molitor and Arthur Edward Waite, who attributed a positive value to kabbalah from a Romantic and occult perspective, respectively. Notwithstanding his approval of their appreciation of kabbalah, Scholem harshly dismissed the value of their works, because of their lack of academic skills:

> It is a pity that the fine philosophical intuition and natural grasp of such students lost their edge because they lacked all critical sense as to historical and philological data in the field, and therefore failed completely when they had to handle problems bearing on the facts.[20]

Interestingly, in the opening remarks of *Major Trends* Scholem ignores completely the works of early twentieth-century Jewish scholars who studied kabbalah from similar perspectives, and who, as I mentioned above, exercised a considerable influence on his approach to Jewish mysticism. In other publications, Scholem was openly critical and polemical toward such Jewish intellectuals, although he did not deny the great impact some of them had on his decision to study kabbalah.

In his autobiography *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, Scholem recognized the great influence Martin Buber's writings on Hasidism had on his interest in Jewish mysticism, while criticizing their Romantic approach: 'The lasting impression which Buber's first two volumes on Hasidism made on me surely played a part as well. Still wholly written in the style of the Vienna School and of the Jugendstil [. . .] they drew attention to this area in romantic transfigurations and flowery meta-

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[19] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 2 (this paragraph was published previously in Scholem's 'Kabbalah at the Hebrew University', *The Reconstructionist* 3, 1937).

[20] Ibid. See also Scholem's 1931 review of Waite's *The Holy Kabbalah*.

phors'.[21] He also relates that in 1915 he read S. A. Horodezky's writings on Hasidism, and after having met with him in Berne started translating a book of his into German. 'While I was working on the translation', Scholem writes, 'I realized that there was something wrong with these writings, and that their author was a rather unperceptive panegyrist'.[22] Scholem was also impressed by the writings of Hillel Zeitlin,[23] and in 1916 translated his article on the 'Shekhinah' into German.[24] In his own paper on the Shekhinah, Scholem discusses Zeitlin's essay, which, he relates, impressed him as 'rather weak and sentimental'.[25] In a letter to his student Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, Scholem wrote of the great impression Zeitlin's writings made on him in his youth, but asserts that 'I could not accept the things he wrote about kabbalah in *Ha-Tequfah* because of the total lack of any historical sense therein'.[26]

Scholem's first publications on kabbalah were polemical review essays of contemporary works on kabbalah that were written from an expressionist neo-Romantic perspective, under the influence of Buber's *Erlebnis* philosophy. In the 1920 issue of *Der Jude*, Scholem published a review essay of Jankew Seidman's anthology of Zohar translations, *Aus dem heiligen Buch Zohar des Rabbi Schimon ben Yochai* (Berlin 1919) and a year later, in the same journal, he published a similarly vicious critique of Max Weiner's anthology *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah* (Vienna & Leipzig 1920).[27] Scholem's polemics were directed against the neo-Romantic, expressionist rendering of kabbalah and the ignorance and lack of philological skills of these authors. Thus, Scholem wrote in his review of Seidman's anthology:

> But this has to be said: The translator has no clue, neither of the Aramaic language nor of its style or its rhythm. He looks at the texts with the eyes of a mystical high-school pupil. Not only—as will be shown—does he

[21] G. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 112.

[22] Ibid., 114–115.

[23] Scholem mentions his reading of Zeitlin's books in the Hebrew version of his autobiography, *Mi-Berlin le-Yerushalayim*, 127. He described him as a 'great author' who discovered the 'great poetical potential of kabbalah' in a speech delivered in 1977 (published in Scholem, *Explications and Implications*, vol. 2 [*Od Davar*], 45).

[24] Scholem never published this translation, which Buber encouraged him to print in *Der Jude*. See Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', 132 note 54.

[25] Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 304 note 96.

[26] Cited in Meir, 'Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar', 136 note 68.

[27] Scholem, 'Über die jüngste Sohar Anthologie', 363–369; idem, 'Lyrik der Kabbalah?', 55–59. See Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 73–74, 88. Kilcher, 'Figuren des Endes', 170–173.

> commit the most awful elementary blunders; he also loves to render terms and sentences that are entirely crystal clear in the original, with stilted, obscure, or completely incomprehensible words. This, then, combines with a grotesque lack of knowledge of mystical terminology [. . .].[28]

Scholem explicitly blamed Martin Buber for Seidman's unhistorical and expressionist approach to kabbalah; he calls Seidman a 'courageous expressionistic theoretician who a few years ago, with both boldness and lack of knowledge, on the basis of Buber's edition of *Tales of Rabbi Nachman* declared kabbalah a province of Expressionism [. . .]'.[29]

In later years, Scholem expressed similar criticism against Buber's approach to Jewish mysticism. At the end of his 1961 article 'Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism', Scholem blames him for reading his own existential philosophy into the Hasidic texts:

> To sum up, the merits of Buber's presentation of Hasidic legends and sayings are indeed very great. [. . .] But, the spiritual message he has read into these writings is far too closely tied to assumptions that derive from his own philosophy of religious anarchism and existentialism and have not roots in the texts themselves. Too much is left out in this description of Hasidism, and what is included is overloaded with very personal speculations.[30]

In his 'Martin Buber's Conception of Judaism', Scholem chides Buber for his reluctance to include bibliographical references in his works on Hasidism:

> For him that was the utmost limit of his accommodation to historical and scientific discussion. He held too closely to the completely personal note he had lent to Hasidism to wish to expose it to the cold light of

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[28] 'Denn das muss gesagt werden: der Übersetzer hat keine Ahnung, weder von der aramäischen Sprache noch von ihrem Stile noch von ihrem Rhythmus. Er betrachtet die Texte gleichsam mit den Augen eines mystischen Gymnasiasten. Nicht nur, dass er, wie gezeigt werden wird, die bösesten Elementarschnitzer macht, sondern ebenso sehr liebt er es, Ausdrücke und Wendungen, die im Original gänzlich und vollkommen klar und deutlich sind, mit gespreizten, dunklen oder ganz unverständlichen Worten wiederzugeben. Dies nun verbindet sich weiter mit einer grotesken Unkenntnis mystischer Terminologie' (Scholem, 'Über die jüngste Sohar Anthologie', 364–365). All translations are mine if not noted otherwise.

[29] '[. . .] [Einen] mutigen expressionistischen Theoretiker, der ebenso frech wie unwissend vor einigen Jahren auf Grund der Buberschen Bearbeitung der *Erzählungen des Rabbi Nachman* die Kabbala als eine Provinz des Expressionismus erklärte [. . .]' (ibid., 366). See also Biale, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah, and Counter-History*, 73–74; Kilcher, 'Figuren des Endes', 170–173.

[30] Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 247 (the article was originally printed in *Commentary* 32 [1961], 305–316. A Hebrew version was published in *Amot* 9 [1963] and reprinted in *Dvarim be-Go* [1976], 361–382).

> confrontation with traditional critical methods. It was inconvenient for Buber to accentuate this difference between his attitude and that of pure research, and I myself only gradually became aware of the severity of that difference. [. . .] I did not yet understand that he was unable to maintain a scholarly attitude toward this topic.[31]

Although Scholem was critical of the expressionist and existentialist rendering of kabbalah amongst Jewish modernist intellectuals in the early twentieth century, he shared with them the modernist and nationalist perception of the symbolic value of kabbalah as a mystically, metaphysically, and nationally significant phenomenon. As we have seen above, Scholem did not deny the influence these intellectuals, especially Buber, had on his decision to study kabbalah. The basic perceptions of Scholem on "Jewish mysticism" follow the assumptions Buber presented in his 1906 introduction to the *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*.[32] The evaluation of Jewish mysticism as a national feature of Judaism was, as Scholem himself observed, expressed by Buber in that short essay: 'Buber was the first Jewish thinker who saw in mysticism a basic feature and continuously operating tendency of Judaism'.[33]

Although he may have had a different opinion of the mystical and metaphysical significance of kabbalah and Hasidism, Scholem shared the assumption of the modernist Jewish intellectuals that Jewish mysticism had a philosophical value which was relevant in the modern era, and like them aspired to reveal this mystical-metaphysical message through the study of kabbalistic and Hasidic texts. Thus, in a 1925 letter to H. N. Bialik, he wrote:

> At the end of these projects, I hope to do what previously brought me to all these studies and led me, unwillingly, to devote myself to philological studies whose limits I am well aware of; that is, to answer the question, 'Is there value to kabbalah or not?' [. . .] I acknowledge unashamedly to you that it is this philosophical interest that supported me even while I was doing linguistic and historical research.[34]

Similarly, in a letter written in 1937 to S. Z. Schocken, entitled 'A Frank Word about My True Intentions in Studying Kabbalah', Scholem wrote:

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[31] Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 166 (translated from the German 'Martin Bubers Auffasung des Judentums', *Eranus Jahrbuch* XXV, Zurich 1967, 9–55).

[32] Margolin, *The Human Temple*, 8.

[33] Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 145.

[34] Scholem, *Dvarim be-Go*, 63. See Kilcher, 'Figuren des Endes', 186.

> So I arrived at the intention of writing not the history but the metaphysics of Kabbalah. [. . .] I sensed such a higher level in the Kabbalah, regardless of how distorted it might have been in a philosophical discussion. It seemed to me that here, beyond the perceptions of my generation, existed a realm of associations which had to touch our own most human experiences.[35]

Yet, for Scholem, the only way to reveal the metaphysical significance and to reach the relevant mystical message of kabbalah for 'today's man' was through rigorous, philological-historical studies.

> For today's man, that mystical totality of "truth", whose existence disappears particularly when it is projected into historical time, can only become visible in the purest way in the legitimate discipline of commentary and in the singular mirror of philological criticism. Today, as at the very beginning, my work lives in this paradox, in the hope of a true communication from the mountain, of that most invisible, smallest fluctuation of history which causes truth to break forth from the illusions of "development".[36]

Thus, Scholem presented the academic approach, and the historical philological skills he and his students were in possession of, as the only valid way to appreciate the value of kabbalah in the modern world. Scholem's polemics against Jewish neo-Romantic approaches to kabbalah was an expression of a struggle over the possession and appropriation of "kabbalistic capital" in the modern world.

4. *Scholem's Polemics against Western Esoteric Kabbalah*

Scholem, who ignored traditional kabbalistic circles because he considered them out of touch with modern life, and criticized neo-Romantic approaches to kabbalah as being sentimental and lacking academic rigor, was also critical and polemical in his attitude toward occult and western esoteric circles who were interested in kabbalah in the *Fin de Siècle* era and during the Weimar period.

In his introduction to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem blames Jewish scholars of the Haskalah period, who because of their antagonism and neglect of the study of kabbalah let the field be monopolized by 'charlatans and dreamers':

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[35] Cited in Biale, *Kabbalah and Counter History*, 75 (the original letter in German is printed in ibid., 215–216). See also Kilcher, ibid.

[36] Ibid.

> The natural and obvious result of the antagonism of the great Jewish scholars was that, since the authorized guardians neglected this field, all manner of charlatans and dreamers came and treated it as their own property.[37] From the brilliant misrepresentations of Alphonse Louis Constant, who has won fame under the pseudonym of Eliphas Lévi to the highly colored humbug of Aleister Crowley and his followers, the most eccentric and fantastic statements have been produced purporting to be legitimate interpretations of Kabbalism.[38]

Scholem repeats elsewhere his evaluation of Eliphas Lévi as a charlatan: 'Alphonse Louis Constant [. . .] disseminated his imaginative charlatanries under a Hebrew pseudonym, as a *grand kabbaliste*, by no means without success'.[39] Similarly, he dismissed Madame H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophical Society as 'pseudo-religion'[40] and blamed her for 'misuse or distortion' of kabbalah.[41] Notwithstanding his dismissal of contemporary occult circles, Scholem recognized the 'real insights' of Arthur Edward Waite, one of the founders of the Order of the Golden Dawn, although, as we have seen, he criticized his lack of 'critical sense'.[42]

Despite his disdain for the esoteric and occult interpretation of kabbalah, Scholem had contact with some circles that were interested in kabbalah from such a perspective. In his autobiographical books, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, and *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, Scholem describes his meeting with members of the Jewish theosophical circle of Oscar Goldberg, whom he labeled 'new magico-metaphysicians', during the years 1921–1923.[43] Notwithstanding Scholem's negative

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[37] This sentence was published previously, in Scholem's *Kabbalah at the Hebrew University*, 11.

[38] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 2. In the notes to this lecture, Scholem writes that 'No words should be wasted on the subject of Crowley's "Kabbalistic" writings [. . .]' (ibid., 353).

[39] Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 134–135.

[40] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 206. In his notes, ibid. 398–399, Scholem discusses Blavatsky's stanzas of the *Book Dzyan* and her reliance on Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbalah Denudata*.

[41] Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 133.

[42] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 2; idem, Review 'Waite, A. E., The Holy Kabbalah', 633–638.

[43] Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, 96–98; 107–109; idem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, 131, 146–149. Scholem included a polemical reference to Golberg's *Wirklichkeit der Hebräer* (without mentioning Goldberg's name) at the end of his article 'Die Theologie des Sabbatianismus in Lichte Abraham Cardozos', published in *Der Jude* 9, 1928. See Smith, '"Die Zauberjuden"', 231; Kilcher, 'Figuren des Endes', 166–167. Scholem also circulated a letter he wrote against Goldberg, which he never published. See Smith, ibid., 230; Kilcher, ibid.

attitude toward Goldberg's 'schizophrenic character' and 'pseudo-kabbalah', he showed a degree of interest in his circle and dedicated an article to him in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. In 1921, Scholem also met the writer Gustav Meyrink, the author of two mystical novels—*Der Golem* and *Das Grüne Gesicht*—which were described by Scholem as presenting 'pseudo-kabbalah'. Scholem described Meyrink as 'a man in whom deep-rooted mystical convictions and literarily exploited charlatanry were almost inextricably amalgamated'.[44]

Scholem's disparaging and sneering critique of contemporary western esoteric followers of kabbalah presents them as 'pseudo-kabbalists' and 'charlatans'. Scholem, who perceived kabbalah as an essentially Jewish phenomenon, was not willing to accept non-Jewish and occultist interpretations of kabbalah as a genuine form of kabbalah. Yet, it is interesting to note that Scholem did not use the notion of 'pseudo-kabbalah' in reference to earlier forms of Christian kabbalah. Scholem's criticism of contemporary occult groups was directed not only at their lack of authenticity but also, as was his critique of contemporary Jewish kabbalah enthusiasts, at their lack of critical academic perspective and of historical-philological skills.

Thus, Scholem criticized and rejected almost all forms of contemporary study and appropriation of kabbalah in the modern world, and accepted as significant only the academic, historical-philological study of the field. He accepted traditional forms of kabbalah as authentic, yet disregarded them as lacking historical significance. He was influenced by Jewish neo-Romantic enthusiasts of kabbalah, but rejected their Romantic enthusiasm and lack of historical philological skills. And, notwithstanding his interest in some forms of western esoteric appropriations of kabbalah, he disparaged their adherents as inauthentic charlatans. By contrast, he represented his own school of kabbalah research as the professional, authoritative guardian of kabbalah and its legitimate interpreter in the modern world. In the continuation of the above cited paragraph in the introduction of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Scholem declares: 'The time has come to reclaim this derelict area and to apply to it the strict standards of historical research'.[45]

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[44] Ibid., 133.
[45] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 2.

5. *The Current Polemics of Scholars against Kabbalah Practitioners*

In the last decades of the twentieth century, a new revival of interest in kabbalah emerged in Israel, America, and Europe, mostly, but not only, in Jewish circles. While some scholars have recently turned their attention to the study of these new forms of kabbalah,[46] many academic scholars of Jewish mysticism express a negative, polemical, and disparaging stance toward these trends, an attitude which is similar to Scholem's polemics against the occult enthusiasts of kabbalah in the early twentieth century. In these polemics, scholars of Jewish mysticism express themselves not as researchers of such phenomena, but rather as "authorized guardians" who defend "true kabbalah" and have the authority to determine its value and meaning in the modern world.

In a 1986 newspaper article, Sarit Fuchs describes what Yosef Dan, one of the leading kabbalah scholars of the Hebrew University, feels about contemporary kabbalists:

> There is a distinct tendency on the part of academic researchers into kabbalah to appeal to their scientific rigor in order to place a clear divide between themselves and groups of humbugs who, according to Professor Dan, tend to be boors and ignoramuses who clothe themselves in a kabbalistic mantle. The populism of these approaches to kabbalah—which does not exist among true kabbalists, who tend to keep their studies under wraps—infuriates Prof. Dan. He regards it as a monstrous perversion of Jewish spirituality, dissociated from the 613 commandments and seriously distorting the historical nature of kabbalah, which was always anchored in a life filled with study of Torah and observance of the commandments. These religious sects that arrived here from California and speak of "pure spiritual life" or "mystical contemplation of reality" offer the masses the drug of false bliss.[47]

In this very revealing criticism (which does not specify exactly against whom it is directed!), the academic scholars are represented as the guardians of true kabbalah, who are defending it against the 'humbugs' from California, who distort its true meaning. Interestingly, the secular,

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[46] See Huss, 'Ask no Questions', 149. Since that article was written, several other studies of contemporary kabbalah have appeared, including Huss, 'All you need is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah', and Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds*. Other studies, as well as several Master and Doctoral theses on contemporary kabbalah are in preparation, or waiting to be published.

[47] Fuchs, 'Where Are the Roots of the Tree of Souls?'. See also Huss, 'Ask no Questions', 156.

academic scholar accepts an orthodox Jewish stance, and criticizes his unidentified opponents for dissociating kabbalah from observance of the Halacha. The academic scholar of kabbalah is infuriated by the 'populism' of contemporary kabbalah, again, accepting a traditional image of kabbalah as esoteric and restricted knowledge (a position which, in fact, many traditional kabbalists rejected). Dan also criticizes his unidentified opponents for speaking about 'pure spiritual life' and 'mystical contemplation of reality'. Presumably, Dan accepts Scholem's assertion that authentic mysticism does not exist in the modern world, and thus scorns contemporary kabbalists' spirituality and mysticism as a 'drug of false bliss'.

Similar criticism was voiced by another prominent kabbalah scholar from the Hebrew University, Moshe Idel, who in a 1989 interview described the contemporary popularization of kabbalah as a 'gross simplification, maybe even deception, an exploitation of the interest of the public, which is in a state of a spiritual crisis'.[48] Similarly, Moshe Halamish, of Bar Ilan Universtiy, opens his *Introduction to Kabbalah*, published in 1991, with a polemical aside against contemporary kabbalists:

> In this day and age [. . .] the widespread fascination with the world of mysticism and the yearning to get to know it more intimately are quite remarkable. Unfortunately, these pursuits have produced some side effects that are inherently dangerous or smell of pure charlatanism. Also in Israel various institutes and courses have appeared in recent years that "sell" kabbalah to all who ask.[49]

Criticism of contemporary forms of kabbalah has also been voiced by Arthur Green, a leading kabbalah scholar and Jewish theologian from Brandeis University, who, in his recently published *Guide to the Zohar*, has expressed his reservations against what he sees as the trivial and faddish elements of the contemporary interest in kabbalah in the western world:

> Our age has seen a great turn toward sources of wisdom neglected by two or three centuries of modernity [. . .]. Recently interest in the Zohar and kabbalah has emerged as part of this trend. As it is true of all other

[48] 'Kabbalah on the Couch', *Ba-Mahane*, 27 April 1989 [Hebrew].

[49] Hallamish, *Introduction to Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 1991, 7 [Hebrew]; see also the English translation, idem, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, 1. The last cited sentence does not appear in the English translation.

> wisdoms examined in the course of this broad cultural phenomenon, the interest in kabbalah includes both serious and trivial or "faddist" elements.[50]

Recently, Yosef Dan offered a more detailed polemic against contemporary kabbalists. In the introduction to his anthology of Jewish mystical experiences, *The Heart and the Fountain*, he writes:

> Kabbalah has become a meaningful component of the various New Age sects and views that began to spread several decades ago and seem to be a dominant force in the emerging culture of the new century. It is being united with astrology and alchemy, with Zen Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as with the multitude of schools of "alternative medicine" that are becoming a new dominant religion. Circles studying "Kabbalah" have spread throughout the Western world from Los Angeles to Berlin; hundreds of books of New Age lore are published including Kabbalah in their titles, and thousands of such locations are spread throughout the Internet. Nothing of the authentic Hebrew Kabbalah was retained during his process. Needless to say, most of the perpetrators of this phenomenon have no knowledge of Hebrew and no access to the original sources of the Kabbalah.[51]

Dan's sneering critique of New Age kabbalah is reminiscent of Scholem's polemics against the occult kabbalah of his time. Like Scholem, Dan regards contemporary kabbalah as unauthentic and criticizes western enthusiasts of kabbalah of having insufficient knowledge of traditional kabbalistic sources. Interestingly, although the cited paragraph appears in a chapter dedicated to 'The Christian Kabbalah', Dan refers in the note to this paragraph to Rabbi Philip Berg (the founder of the Kabbalah Center), who is a Jewish-orthodox kabbalist:

> A distressing example of this phenomenon is the vast enterprise of "kabbalistic" publications initiated and directed by "kabbalist Rav Berg". Originally he based his teachings on the work of one of the last authentic kabbalists of the twentieth century, Rabbi Ashlag [. . .]. It was heartbreaking to observe how this authentic enterprise deteriorated into New Age mishmash of nonsense.[52]

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[50] Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, 186.

[51] Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*, 48.

[52] Ibid., 285. The second example he gives is of Zeev ben Shimon Halevi: 'Another distressing phenomenon is connected with the numerous books concerning kabbalah, its history, nature and traditions, as instructions for modern living, published by Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, who is a nice English gentleman from Hampstead who does not know any Hebrew'.

The academic scholar's polemics is directed not only against the New Age renderings of kabbalah and its popularization in western culture, but also against the revival of interest in traditional kabbalistic practices in Israel. Thus, Yosef Dan includes in his category of pseudo- and inauthentic Israeli kabbalists of 'Asian origin':

> A new mixture of kabbalistic traditions, worship of leaders, and especially magic took shape in Israel in the last few decades. Parallel to the Western New Age, Israelis, especially those of Asian origins, developed new reverence to "kabbalistic" leaders, who were in most cases magicians and writers of amulets. Numerous "gurus" are presently operating in Israel, healing spiritual ailments and offering ways of confronting the hardships of modern existence; they are routinely called "kabbalists" even though there is hardly any element of the authentic traditions of the Kabbalah in their teachings. Celebrations are held at the tombs of old sages, in Safed and Netivot, attracting sometimes tens of thousands of adherents; as usual in such circumstances, this popular quest for heroes, saints, and healers is sometimes commercialized and used or abused by impostors. On the whole, the situation is not different from the contemporary surge of interest in magic, astrology, and gurus that characterize contemporary Western culture.[53]

In this paragraph, Dan combines a typical Orientalist disparaging stance against contemporary kabbalah practitioners and consumers, many of whom are of Jewish-Arabic decent,[54] with a modern, rationalist, polemical stance critical of New Age phenomena. Similar to his critique of the 'Californian humbugs' and New Age kabbalists, Dan also portrays the 'Israeli Gurus' as inauthentic kabbalists. In the case of contemporary Israeli kabbalah, his criticism is directed especially against the 'magical' nature of their practices, as well as its commercialization.

Arthur Green also describes the current revival of kabbalah in Israel, which in his view emerged after the 1967 and 1973 wars, in the following somewhat patronizing and Orientalist tone:

> It is manifest in the growth of kabbalistic Yeshivot, or academies; by the publication of many new editions of kabbalistic works; and by a campaign of public outreach intended to spread the teaching of Kabbalah more broadly. This new emphasis on Kabbalah is partly due to

[53] Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain*, 42.

[54] Interestingly, Dan describes them as having 'Asian origins'. In fact, most participants in the practices he refers to are of North African descent. However, there are also many Israelis of European and American descent amongst the consumers and practitioners of contemporary kabbalah.

> the reassertion of pride in the Sephardic heritage, where Kabbalah has an important place. It is also in part related to the difficult and trying times through which Israel has lived, resulting in both a resurgence of messianism and a turn to "practical Kabbalah", a longstanding part of Near Eastern Judaism, as a source of protection against enemies and hope of victory over them.[55]

Green concludes with a critical remark, where he—like other academic scholars, and using similar disparaging quotation marks—denies the authentic kabbalistic nature of some contemporary versions of kabbalah: 'Some versions of what is proffered as "Kabbalah" today can be described only as highly debased renditions of the original teaching and include large elements of folk religion that have little to do with actual kabbalistic teachings'.[56]

The polemics of the academic scholars are directed at different types of contemporary kabbalah, and present different perspectives concerning the value and significance of kabbalah in the modern world. Yet, the recurring theme in these polemics is the denial of the authenticity of present-day kabbalists. The use of the term "charlatanism", the disparaging quotation marks around the word "kabbalists", and the description of their teaching as "deception", "deterioration", or "perversion", depicts present-day followers of the kabbalah as "pseudo-kabbalists", a term that was used also in Scholem's polemics.

In contrast to the "charlatans" who engage in "pseudo-kabbalah", the academic scholars refer to professionals who study "true", "original", "actual", or "authentic" kabbalah. According to these scholars, the professionals include the "true" kabbalists of the past, possibly some "authentic" but usually unnamed contemporary kabbalists, and the academic scholars themselves. As the journalist Sarit Fuchs perceived, the kabbalah scholars present themselves as the professional kabbalah experts, versus the charlatan humbugs: 'There is a distinct tendency on the part of academic researchers into kabbalah to appeal to their scientific rigor in order to place a clear divide between themselves and groups of humbugs [. . .]'.[57] Allan Nadler, in a review article of Moshe Idel's *Messianic Mystics*, positions the latter's 'erudite studies' (notwithstanding his severe criticism against Idel's book) in contrast to 'contemporary abuses of kabbalistic learning' by the Kabbalah Center:

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[55] Green, *A Guide to the Kohar*, 186–187.
[56] Ibid., 187.
[57] Fuchs, 'Where Are the Roots of the Tree of Souls?'

> [. . .] the recent emergence of numerous mystical charlatans who are peddling a deeply distorted version of Judaism's most profound spiritual teachings to rich and famous Jews and non-Jews, from rock singers to Hollywood stars. The most dangerous of these trendy purveyors of "Jewish mysticism" is the Kabbalah Learning Centre, an organization whose goal is to transform kabbalah from esoteric theosophical teachings into a vehicle for New Age healing. [. . .] In light of the contemporary abuses of kabbalistic learning, the erudite studies by the prolific Israeli scholar Moshe Idel are a reassuring reminder of the real seriousness, breadth and profundity of Jewish mysticism.[58]

Arthur Green, in the concluding paragraph of his *Guide to the Zohar*, argues against what he presents as the contemporary debased renditions of the original kabbalah and contrasts them with his own academic introduction to the kabbalah and the Zohar as a guide for the contemporary reader who is searching for the authentic and profound aspects of kabbalah:

> It is certain, however, that the Zohar will continue to find a place in the hearts of the new readers, some of whom will turn to the more authentic and profound aspects of its teachings. It is hoped that these readers will be helped and guided by this *Guide* as they turn to study the holy Zohar in its most recent translation and commentary.[59]

Similarly, Or N. Rose, in his article 'Madonna's Challenge: Understanding Kabbalah Today', represents some of the academic scholars of kabbalah as religious teachers and authoritative interpreters (and censors!) of kabbalah in the modern world. Against the teaching of the Kabbalah Center and other 'swindlers, novices and fundamentalists' Rose posits 'well educated and sensitive interpreters of this tradition':

> Thankfully, there is a small, but growing cadre of American and Israeli religious teachers and scholars, such as Daniel Matt, Arthur Green, Melilah Hellner-Eshed, Havivah Pedayah, and Elliot Wolfson, who are engaging in the thoughtful exploration of the classical teaching of Kabbalah, asking what of this ancient tradition remains compelling to seekers today, and what is better left aside.[60]

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[58] Nadler, 'Moshe Idel's search for the Messiah'.

[59] Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, 187.

[60] Rose, 'Madonna's Challenge: Understanding Kabbalah Today', 24, cited by Goldish, 'Kabbalah, Academia and Authenticity', 63.

Matt Goldish, in his discussion of Rose's (as well as Rabbi Eric Yoffie's)[61] polemics against the Kabbalah Center, wondered: 'why is Berg, a Rabbi and traditionally trained kabbalist, perceived as a fraud, while these scholars are seen as reliable teachers of Kabbalah'.[62] Goldish's answer in his article 'Kabbalah, Academia and Authenticity' is that 'academics are now near the forefront of popular Kabbalah as a part of Jewish religious practice'[63] and that their polemics is part of a debate among different 'Kabbalah factions' about the proper reconciliation between Kabbalah and modernity.[64] Although phrased in a different terminology, my argument is similar to Goldish's: the polemics of academic scholars against Berg and other present-day kabbalists is a struggle over kabbalah's cultural power.

As Matt Goldish observed, the polemics of academic scholars against contemporary kabbalists represents the academic study of Jewish mysticism as yet another contemporary kabbalistic faction in the modern world. These polemics are an expression of the ideological and theological stance of academic scholars of Jewish mysticism, who aspire to determine the symbolic value of kabbalah, and to control its increasing cultural capital in the modern world. The harsh, disparaging polemics of the academic scholars is intended to distinguish themselves from non-academic kabbalah enthusiasts, to undermine their rivals' authenticity and legitimacy, and to establish academic scholars of Jewish mysticism as the authorized guardians of the Jewish kabbalistic tradition.

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[61] Published in the 'Dear Reader' column of *Reform Judaism*, Winter 2004, and cited by Goldish, ibid., 63.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., 64.

[64] Ibid., 67.

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PART TWO

HERESIES, IDENTITIES, AND INTERCONFESSIONAL POLEMICS

THE TROUBLE WITH IMAGES: ANTI-IMAGE POLEMICS AND WESTERN ESOTERICISM

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

> The mistrust of the visual image winds, like a double helix, through the structural heritage of the Western mind [...] religiously or philosophically our tradition bears the message: beware of pictures.
>
> Linda Sexson[1]

1. *Introduction: Paradigms and Polemics*

That there exists a kind of "elective affinity" between the academic study of western esotericism and the study of images is obvious from even a cursory look at the main scholarly traditions in the field. Frances Yates' influential concept of the "Hermetic Tradition" of the Renaissance was grounded in the assumptions and methodologies of the "Warburg school", dominated by art historians (such as Aby Warburg himself, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, Edgar Wind, and Ernst Gombrich, all of them responsible for important contributions to our field of study)[2] who traced the transmission of "pagan" traditions in Renaissance culture; and although Yates was not herself an art historian, the importance she attached to images is evident throughout her oeuvre. While Yates laid the foundations for what can be considered the first major research paradigm in the study of western esotericism,[3] the second one emerged during the 1990s, and was based upon Antoine Faivre's famous definition of esotericism as a "form of thought" characterized by four intrinsic and two non-intrinsic characteristics. Faivre's intellectual development

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[1] Sexson, *Ordinarily Sacred*, 78.

[2] Warburg's writings in this regard were focused on astrology; Panofsky and Saxl are famous for their discussions of the melancholic temperament in the context of Renaissance magic and astrology; Wind's work highlighted the continuation of "paganism" in Renaissance culture; and to Gombrich's crucial work I will return in this paper.

[3] For my arguments in that regard, see Hanegraaff, 'Beyond the Yates Paradigm'; and cf. id., 'The Study of Western Esotericism', 507–508.

is a complex one, but there can be no doubt about the central importance to his thinking of the "Eranos approach" to religion, with its strong emphasis on symbols and myths, and of closely related religionist circles (notably the Université de Saint Jean de Jérusalem) for which the same it true;[4] and although Faivre eventually distanced himself from religionist assumptions and has since the early 1990s come to embrace a historical/empirical methodology, his way of looking at esotericism has always emphasized the "imaginal", symbolic, and mythical dimension rather than the doctrinal one.[5]

In different ways and for different reasons, then, the Yates paradigm and the Faivre paradigm both have the effect of privileging the "imaginal" domain over that of words, theories, and doctrines, and their attendant disciplines, such as theology or philosophy. I have argued elsewhere that the Faivre paradigm is now in the process of being replaced by a new one that reflects the 'widespread disaffection in contemporary intellectual life with the grand narratives of modernity and their ideological underpinnings'[6] and reacts to their simplifications by emphasizing pluralism and complexity instead. One major effect of this development is that it is becoming less and less convincing to see western esotericism as a quasi-coherent and more or less self-contained "tradition", "counter-culture", or "subcurrent" that can be defined by pitting it against "mainstream" currents or traditions such as Christian theology, rational philosophy, or empirical science. Nor, or so I would argue, does the new emerging perspective sit very well with looking at esotericism along phenomenological lines, as a quasi-essentialist "form of thought" which is in fact defined by its very contrast with that of a "disenchanted" secular worldview (and is hence incapable of accounting for processes of secularization in western esotericism since the eighteenth century).[7] Instead, what we presently see emerging in the

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[4] See McCalla, 'Antoine Faivre and the Study of Esotericism', esp. 444–447. The standard work on Eranos is Hakl, *Verborgene Geist von Eranos*.

[5] See e.g. his articles on imagination in *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition*. Faivre has emphasized on many occasions that esotericism in his opinion is not based on doctrine, also pointing out that this is why he sees no conflict between his personal attraction to Christian theosophy and the fact that he is himself a practicing Roman Catholic (see interview in Smoley & Kinney, 'What is Esotericism', esp. 64 and 68).

[6] Hanegraaff, 'The Study of Western Esotericism', 509.

[7] For the basic argument, see Hanegraaff, 'Magic V', 741: 'The first three [of Faivre's characteristics] in particular (arguably even the fourth one) all stand for the very things that were logically incompatible with the new scientific perspectives, which replaced non-causal correspondences by instrumental causality, an organic worldview

work of an increasing number of scholars is an emphasis on the complexity of western culture as a pluralistic field of competing religious and ideological identities,[8] and on western esotericism as an analytical concept (*not* a descriptive category)[9] which brings that situation into focus by systematically highlighting religious and cultural dimensions that have traditionally been marginalized as "other". Among those dimensions, or so I will argue, the domain of images is a—arguably even *the*—central one.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the emerging research paradigm may profitably be based upon an analysis of how and why the process of "othering" has in fact occurred: I have argued that our present understanding of "western esotericism" as a distinct field of research (however difficult to define) is the historical outcome of what I call the "Grand Polemical Narrative" by means of which western culture has been construing its own identity over the course of many centuries.[10] The construction of identity always takes places 'by means of telling stories—to ourselves and to others—of who, what and how we want to be';[11] and such stories can only be told by simultaneously construing an "other" who represents whatever we do *not* want to be. By the eighteenth century, the long cumulative process in which the Grand Polemical Narrative of western culture had been construing and reconstruing its complementary "others" had resulted in the existence of

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by a mechanistic one, and the Neoplatonic multi-leveled cosmos by one that should be reducible to only matter in motion'. For my reservations about whether Faivre's definition can sufficiently account for historical change, and for the "secularization of Western esotericism" in particular, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 401–403, and 'The Study of Western Esotericism', 508.

[8] This emphasis is particularly clear in recent contributions by Kocku von Stuckrad (see notably *Western Esotericism* and 'Western Esotericism'). While I have reservations about von Stuckrad's proposed discursive model of western esotericism, I fully endorse his general perspective on religious pluralism and complexity. With respect to the idea of a "European history of religions" (which should be expanded to include at least the North-American continent as well, and should also have room for looking at the "diffusion" of European esoteric traditions to other parts of the world), it is important to understand that the concept—as used by von Stuckrad, Burkhard Gladigow, Michael Stausberg, and others—is meant to include not only actual religious minorities such as the Jews and Muslims, but also the continuation of symbolic systems, or fragments of them, that were no longer actively practiced (such as e.g. Neoplatonic theurgy, Hermetism, Gnosticism, or Zoroastrianism), as well as their continued presence as "remembered traditions".

[9] On that crucial point, see Hanegraaff, 'On the Construction of "Esoteric Traditions"'.

[10] Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge'.

[11] Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge', 226.

a domain in the collective imagination that contained everything we nowadays (!)[12] associate with the field of "western esotericism". This is where modernity vaguely but consistently locates a variety of "pagan superstitions" and their continuation in Christian contexts; heresies like Gnosticism; occult sciences like astrology, alchemy, and magic; the mystical speculations of theosophical and kabbalistic hermeneutics; the "enthusiasm" of irrational sects; and various real or imagined "hidden traditions" or secret societies inspired by and connected with such ideas.[13] Moreover, after the eighteenth century this entire domain of the "other" came to be interpreted in a *positive* sense as well, by various groups and individuals who—reflecting the historicism of the time—defined their own identity by inventing a "magical", "occultist", or "esoteric" tradition as alternative to *their* "other": what they perceived as the mainstream traditions of the establishment, such as the churches, rational philosophy, and materialistic science.[14] The perception of western esotericism as a "tradition" is, I submit, essentially based upon these nineteenth-century esoteric appropriations of the Enlightenment "occult".

All the currents and ideas belonging to this category are assumed to "somehow" hang together, because together they represent the reservoir of what modernity rejects. It is crucial to understand that

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[12] Western esotericism (the very term dates from the nineteenth century) is an etic construct applied retrospectively to earlier periods, and the fact that specific components are nowadays seen as belonging to it does not mean they were necessarily seen as "other" in earlier periods; quite frequently the opposite was true, and the process of marginalization and exclusion occurred only later (cf. Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge', 225 note 4). Among the various examples that could be given, astrology is an obvious one.

[13] Cf. Hanegraaff, 'The Study of Western Esotericism', 513, and 'Magic V', 741, on western esotericism as a "waste-basket" category in which scholars in the wake of the Enlightenment dumped everything that did not fit the relatively neat categories of "religion" and "science". See also Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 382 for some examples of how concerned scholars imagine this dangerous "other": Christoph Schorsch discussed New Age as 'die Rückkehr zum Dunkel der eingeschränkten Bewußtheit, zum muffigen Dünkel spiritistischer Ratifikationen und zur undurchdringlichen Nacht, in der die Gespenster umgehen' (*New Age Bewegung*, 223, with English translation) and Gottfried Kuënzlen 'kann und will es nicht glauben, daß ein gnostisch-esoterischer Verschnitt, daß Okkultismus, ja Obskurantismus, daß heidnisch-magische Versatzstücke, daß wabernde Mythologismen als neue Kulturmuster öffentliche Kraft gewinnen' ('New Age', 38, also with English translation). Such statements go back to the mid-1980s and I am cautiously optimistic that nowadays scholars may find them mostly amusing.

[14] For a short discussion see Hanegraaff, 'Magic V', 741–742. For an extensive discussion of esoteric constructions of "Tradition" see Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 85–200.

although the various inhabitants of this imaginal space roughly correspond to currents, persons, ideas, and practices that have an actual historical existence, they are by no means synonymous with them: as every serious scholar in western esotericism knows, there always yawns an abyss between how esotericism and its representatives appear in the polemical imagination and how critical historical research finds them to be in actual fact. Therefore the mission of the study of western esotericism, at least as I have come to see it, is to analyze and deconstruct the various strategies of exclusion and "othering" basic to the Grand Polemical Narrative, seek to correct the historical pictures of western culture that were built on it, and attempt to replace them by others that more adequately reflect the historical evidence and are less dependent on hegemonic claims and ideologies.

Formulated another way, the task is to be critically aware of the difference between mnemohistory (history as remembered in the collective imagination) and historiography (the attempt to describe, as accurately as possible, what actually happened).[15] This difference is crucial because often our memories are misleading and factually incorrect, both on the individual and the collective level: they are not "photographic reflections" of what actually happened, but highly selective social constructs.[16] The basic distinction between mnemohistory and

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[15] Needless to say, modern historiography has long abandoned nineteenth-century concepts of historiography associated with Leopold von Ranke and his school. I assume it is no longer necessary to belabor that point. A particularly clear example of the kind of shift I have in mind is provided by the study of Gnosticism in the wake of the recent studies of Michael Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, and Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (see discussion in Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge', 234–236, and idem, 'Gnosticism'): based upon a thorough deconstruction of quasi-heresiological concepts that have kept dominating the scholarly imagination until far into the 1990s, such studies undoubtedly lead us towards a more accurate picture of "what actually happened".

[16] For theoretical discussions of memory and mnemohistory, see Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 29–86; idem, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 11–44; and idem, *Moses the Egyptian*, 8–17. The concept of mnemohistory has its origins in the work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), who during the 1920s developed his concept of "collective memory" (*mémoire collective*). Halbwachs' basic insight was that memory is a social phenomenon: 'in remembering, we do not descend into the depths of our most private inner life, but we bring to that inner life an order and a structure that is socially conditioned and connects us with the social world' (Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 11; here and in the rest of the chapter, translations from the German are mine). Hence memories are social constructs, not "photographic" reflections of "what really happened". *A fortiori* this is true of what Assmann refers to as "communicative memory": 'This memory belongs in the in-between realm between individuals, it develops by means of communication between human beings. In this process, the role played by emotions is decisive. Love, interest, empathy, feelings of

historiography was introduced by the influential German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, and I am indebted to his work; but it should be noted that my approach and agenda is slightly different from his. Assmann not only distinguishes between mnemohistory and historiography, but seems intent on keeping them strictly separate as well, and practice mnemohistory as a more or less autonomous discipline.[17] My agenda, by contrast, is historiographical throughout: my concern is with pointing out how traditional historiography has been continuously influenced and conditioned—indeed, one might say, contaminated—by normative concepts, assumptions, and terminologies rooted in the Grand Polemical Narrative, frequently leading to "false" or "artificial" memories of our own past which are simply not supported by the historical evidence. No dimension of western culture has suffered from the resulting distortions more severely than western esotericism. The ultimate goal is therefore to break the power that traditional mnemohistorical constructs exert over historiography, in the interest of a more neutral, less prejudiced, and factually more accurate perspective.

In the context of a new approach to the study of western esotericism as advocated here, the role of images will remain a central one, but for reasons that are different from those that inspired the representatives of the Yates and the Faivre paradigms. One very general reason has to do with the fact that *all* religion—as opposed to theology—is ultimately grounded in non-discursive systems of myth, symbol, and ritual, not in doctrines and beliefs.[18] More specifically, if "western esotericism" is a

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connectedness, the wish to belong, but also hate, hostility, distrust, pain, guilt, and shame, give direction and perspective to our memories' (op. cit., 13). With respect to how the Grand Polemical Narrative has constructed its characteristic "memory of the occult", it is important to point out that the act of *forgetting* is an integral part of the social construction of memory: 'For a functional communicative memory, forgetting is as important as remembering […] To remember something means letting other things recede into the background, drawing distinctions, canceling out many things in order to highlight some others' (ibid.).

[17] Hence in analyzing how "Egypt" and "Moses" have functioned in the collective memory of western culture, Assmann does not address the question of how those imaginative constructs are related to historical facts: 'I shall not even ask the question—let alone, answer it—whether Moses was an Egyptian, or a Hebrew, or a Midianite. This question concerns the historical Moses and thus pertains to history. I am concerned with Moses as a figure of memory' (*Moses the Egyptian*, 11). Cf. Assmann's contrast between "positivist historiography" and mnemohistory on page 10, and analogous remarks elsewhere, e.g. 'The aim of a mnemohistorical study is not to ascertain the possible truth of traditions such as [etc.]' (op. cit., 9).

[18] For this basic point as applied to the history of Christianity, see Hanegraaff, 'The

construct that exists first and foremost in the collective imagination, it is crucial to analyze the nature of the images that the Grand Polemical Narrative has conjured up about them, and critically compare these to the historical realities they are claimed to depict. But most specifically, as formulated by the opening quotation from Linda Sexson, it is indeed true that an anti-image discourse 'winds, like a double helix, through the structural heritage of the western mind': from the perspectives both of biblical monotheism and of Greek rationalism, images are "trouble", and it will be my argument here that by exploring why this is the case, we get to the very core of what the Grand Polemical Narrative is all about. Hence in the rest of this article I intend to concentrate on the basic "deep structure"[19] of the anti-image discourse in western culture, and how it has contributed to the construction of the field we refer to as western esotericism. I will argue that the trouble with images can be summarized under three headings: one that has to do with *worldviews*, one that has to do with *knowledge*, and one that has to do with *power*.

Dreams of Theology'; for theoretical background, see Hanegraaff, 'Defining Religion'. Doctrine and belief may often be of great importance in religion, but that lived religion is "based upon it" is a Protestant and rationalist preconception (and the main weakness in traditional anti-religious polemics): one does not practice religion because one holds certain beliefs, but rather, in the course of practicing religion one professes to hold certain beliefs. What it means to "hold a belief" is actually not as clear as it might seem, as may be demonstrated at an example discussed by Benson Saler: reliable polls have shown that about one in four adults in the United States "believes" that intelligent beings from outer space have been in contact with humans, and this has been a reason for UFO proponents to conclude triumphantly that 'for every fundamentalist Christian there are five UFO believers' (Durant, 'Evolution of Public Opinion on UFOs', 22–23, as quoted in Saler, 'On What We May Believe', 47–48).

[19] My understanding of "deep structures" in western culture is ultimately rooted in a "Lovejovian" approach to the history of ideas, as explained at greater length in my article 'Empirical Method', 113–117. See in particular page 114 about Arthur O. Lovejoy's "doctrine of forces" which, as summarized by Louis O. Mink, concentrates on 'the logical "pressure" of ideas, by which logical implications tend to be expressly drawn by someone as inferences' (Mink, 'Change and Causality in the History of Ideas', 14). I agree that, accordingly, 'the historian's task involves more than just description; (s)he needs "a certain aptitude for the discrimination and analysis of concepts, and an eye for not immediately obvious logical relations or quasilogical affinities between ideas"' (Hanegraaff, 'Empirical Method', 114, quoting Lovejoy, 'Reflections on the History of Ideas', 4).

2. *Worldviews: Monotheism versus Cosmotheism*

In a choral piece written in 1926, Arnold Schönberg expressed the monotheistic creed with admirable clarity:

Du sollst dir kein Bild machen!	You should not make yourself an image!
Denn ein Bild schränkt ein,	For an image restricts,
begrenzt, faßt,	limits, catches,
was unbegrenzt und	that which should remain unlimited
unvorstellbar bleiben soll.	and unimaginable.
Ein Bild will Namen haben:	An image wants to have names:
du kannst ihn nur vom Kleinen nehmen;	you can take it only from what is small;
du sollst das Kleine nicht verehren!	you should not worship what is small!
Du mußt an den Geist glauben!	You must believe in the Spirit!
Unmittelbar, gefühllos und selbstlos.	Directly, unemotionally, and selflessly.
Du mußt, Auserwählter, mußt,	You must, you chosen one, must,
willst du's bleiben![20]	if that is what you want to remain.[21]

The polemical oppositions on which this fragment relies are familiar ones. The One God is pitted against the many gods of the pagans, his invisibility against their visibility as statues and images, and his omnipresence and limitlessness against the fact that they are tied to and limited to specific bodily forms and locations. In short: God cannot be imagined by the limited human mind, and any attempt to imagine him—to make him fit some human image—is therefore fundamentally misguided. Clearly, then, the rhetorical "other" of biblical monotheism is "idolatry".[22] Still in the same short fragment, Schönberg manages to also touch on a whole series of related elements: God's unspeakable name (as opposed to the names of the gods), God as a transcendent mystery (hence the impossibility of grasping him by analogy with "das

[20] Arnold Schönberg, opus 27 nr. 2. Schönberg's opera *Moses and Aron* is about the conflict between Moses' demand for radical monotheism and Aron's willingness to compromise with the people's need for images; this was also the conflict of Schönberg himself, who discovered that expressing the inexpressible by means of the "mediations" of art and music necessarily implied a compromise with the alien purity of the divine as well as the artistic ideal (see Hanegraaff, 'De gnosis van Arnold Schönberg').

[21] All English translations of Schönberg are mine.

[22] As argued in Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge', 230–234, with reference to Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 4.

Kleine" (i.e. with creatures and created things), the prohibition against worshiping the creations of one's own hands, the supremacy of spirit over matter, the necessity of "blind" faith in that spirit as opposed to mere "visual piety",[23] the imperative of direct contact with the divine as opposed to contact by "mediations" (that is to say, images), and finally, a rejection of sentimentality in religion and the need to sacrifice one's selfish motives.

As this inventory indicates, one does not grasp the nature of monotheism as a revolutionary phenomenon in the history of religions if one reduces it simplistically to the "belief in One God".[24] Rather, the term stands for a highly complex "total vision" of the very nature of reality, the essence of which I found formulated very nicely in a French article: 'le divin ne se révèle que par sa radicale étrangeté' ('the divine reveals itself only by its radical strangeness'),[25] or to put it as sharply as possible: *God is an alien*. I do not choose this formulation to get an easy laugh, but to make a very precise point. Jan Assmann, whose analysis of the nature of monotheism I consider fundamental, points out how its basic perspective differs from its logical opposite, "cosmotheism":[26]

> The opposite of monotheism is not polytheism, or idolatry, but cosmotheism, the religion of the immanent God and the veiled truth, which both reveals and conceals itself in a thousand images: images that do not logically exclude, but illuminate and complement one another. A divine world does not stand in opposition against the world of cosmos, man, and society; rather, it is a principle that permeates it and gives it structure, order and meaning. [...] The divine cannot be excluded from the world.[27]

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[23] The reference is to Morgan, *Visual Piety*.

[24] Cf. Hanegraaff, 'Idolatry'.

[25] Abécassis, 'Au delà de l'image: l'interdit', 69.

[26] Defining the logical opposite of monotheism as "cosmotheism" does not contradict defining its 'rhetorical "other"' as idolatry (as I did earlier). Whereas "cosmotheism" is clearly intended as an etic concept, "idolatry" as used here might perhaps be called a "second-degree emic concept": although it does not occur literally as an emic expression, it is in fact a direct equivalent of what the Hebrew Bible refers to as "worship of other gods", and is known in rabbinic literature as *avodah zarah* ("strange worship"; see Halbertal & Margalit, *Idolatry*, 3).

[27] 'Der Gegensatz von Monotheismus heißt nicht Polytheismus oder gar Götzendienst und Idolatrie, sondern Kosmotheismus, die Religion des immanenten Gottes und der verschleierten Wahrheit, die sich in tausend Bildern zeigt und verhüllt, Bildern, die sich nicht logisch ausschließen, sondern beleuchten und ergänzen. [...] Eine Götterwelt steht der Welt aus Kosmos, Mensch und Gesellschaft nicht gegenüber, sondern ist ein Prinzip, das sie strukturierend, ordnend und sinngebend durchdringt. [...] Das Göttliche läßt sich aus der Welt nicht herauslösen' (Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung*, 64, 61,

This is what Frances Yates called—without further explanation—the "religion of the world"[28] found in the Hermetic writings, based upon the fundamental assumption that the divine is at home in the world. Starting from there, it is only natural for the gods to actually take permanent residence in temples prepared for them, by inhabiting their cult statues and thus becoming a visible and tangible presence, as described in the *Asclepius*;[29] and it is no less natural that when they have to leave their homes behind and return to heaven—as described in the famous "lament" of the same *Asclepius*[30]—this is presented as a deeply traumatic event.

In the sharpest possible contrast with such a perspective, the divine being who eventually (that is to say, mnemohistorically) emerged as the normative One God of biblical monotheism[31] is a stranger to the world in which human beings are living their daily lives: he is not visible and has no body, hence he cannot be touched, his name cannot be spoken, he cannot be grasped by our mind, and cannot be understood in any mundane terms. In short, he is *der ganz Andere*—the Wholly Other, and worshiping him therefore requires a psychological act of distancing oneself from worldly concerns. Quite obviously, such a God can only reside in some unimaginable domain beyond the reach of any image. Very interestingly, however, by becoming the normative basis for religion in western culture, this alien God has been "domesticated" and

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62; for clarity and convenience I have quoted the passage on page 64 first, followed by those on pp. 61–62, which further explains the nature of Assmann's concept of "cosmotheism").

[28] Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 6 and *passim*.

[29] *Ascl.* 23–24, 37–38.

[30] *Ascl.* 24–26. On how the gods are made to feel welcome and "at home" in the world, cf. *Ascl.* 38: '[…] those gods are entertained with constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven's harmony: so that the heavenly ingredient enticed into the idol by constant communication with heaven may gladly endure its long stay among humankind' (transl. according to Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 90).

[31] Again, my concern here is with how monotheism has come to be "remembered", rightly or wrongly, as the true essence of biblical theology. For specific periods, including the very origins of monotheism, this normative picture is often called into doubt by precise historiography, for example if it is argued that the First Temple in fact contained a cult statue of YHWH (Niehr, 'In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue'; and cf. the exhaustive study of images in the Hebrew bible by Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder*). In fact, that the memory of monotheism is often not supported by the historical evidence is exactly what the concept of mnemohistory is all about. Likewise, I will not enter into Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, which could be seen as attempts at bridging the gap between the alien God and his creatures: my concern here is with the basic structural problem, not with its various attempted solutions.

has paradoxically come to be imagined as belonging "on our side"; and although radical alterity is precisely *not* characteristic of the pagan gods, they are the ones who have come to be imagined as the demonic "others" par excellence.

The conflict between monotheism and cosmotheism—logically as well as practically implying an anti-image and a pro-image perspective—is a deep structure of the history of religion in the West, and my argument it that it has created crucial conditions for the emergence of western esotericism. Again, Arnold Schönberg provides us with an excellent analysis, in his opera *Moses und Aron* (1932). The basic conflict is impersonated by Moses' uncompromising demand for radical monotheism and Aron's willingness to compromise with the people's need for images.[32] Schönberg identified himself with Moses, but finally had to concede that any attempt at expressing the inexpressible requires the use of "mediations" ("*Bilder*", or images), and therefore compromises the alien purity of the divine ideal. The opera opens with Moses confidently addressing the burning bush: 'Einziger, ewiger, allgegenwärtiger, unsichtbarer und unvorstellbarer Gott!' ('One, eternal, omnipresent, invisible, and unimaginable God!').[33] But much later, when in despair over the golden calf he has broken the tables of the commandments, the fiery pillar appears; and although Moses first dismisses it as just another idol, Aron points out to him that it is in fact one more sign from the invisible God, like the burning bush itself. Hereupon Moses breaks down in despair:

Unvorstellbarer Gott!	Unimaginable God!
Unaussprechlicher,	Unspeakable,
vieldeutiger Gedanke!	multi-interpretable idea!
Läßt du diese Auslegung zu?	Do you allow this interpretation?
Darf Aron, mein Mund,	May Aron, my mouth,
dieses Bild machen?	make this image?

[32] Schönberg, *Moses und Aron*, II. Akt, 2. Szene, where the people argue with Aron: 'Götter, Bilder unsres Auges, Götter, Herren unsrer Sinne! / Ihre leibliche Sichtbarkeit, Gegenwart, verbürgt unsre Sicherheit! / Ihre Grenzen und Meßbarkeit fordern nicht, was unserm Gefühl versagt. / Götter, nahe unserm Fühlen, Götter, die wir ganz begreifen / [...] Farbig ist diese Gegenwart, düster ist jene Ewigkeit' ('Gods, images of our vision, gods, masters of our senses! / Your bodily visibility and presence assures our certainty! / You are limited and measurable, and do not require what our feelings deny. / Gods, near to our feelings, gods that we wholly understand / [...] Colorful is this presence, bleak is that eternity').

[33] Schönberg, *Moses und Aron*, I. Akt, 1. Szene. Very significantly, he is answered from the burning bush by a mysterious whirlwind of voices.

So habe ich mir ein Bild gemacht,	Thus I have made myself an image,
falsch, wie ein Bild nur sein kann!	false, like any image!
So bin ich geschlagen!	Thus I am defeated!
So war alles Wahnsinn,	Thus all that I have thought
was ich gedacht habe,	has been madness
und kann und darf nicht gesagt werden!	and cannot and should not be said!
O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt![34]	O word, thou word, that fails me!

Whereas Aron has images at his disposal, and is therefore quite effective in leading the people, Moses finds himself empty-handed and misunderstood because he has no "word" that (as an alternative to images) might convey the inexpressible Idea of God.[35] What he knows he cannot express; and thus his message remains alien and incomprehensible to his people.

What is the importance of the conflict between monotheism and cosmotheism for the emergence of western esotericism? It would be misleading to simply associate cosmotheism with esotericism and monotheism with established religion and theology: interpretations along those lines—which have been frequent—inevitably end up defending simplistic concepts of esotericism as a "counterculture" or "undercurrent" pitted against the mainstream. Such narratives have much dramatic potential, precisely because they are based upon the Grand Polemical Narrative, so that they are able to tell emotionally appealing stories of a battle between darkness and light. Pro-esoteric versions may tell us how the light of esoteric truth has managed to survive through the ages, against the dark forces of ignorance and oppression, or how the "religion of the world" always makes its comeback in spite of the sinister asceticism and world-denial of the established priesthood, and so on. Anti-esoteric versions may tell us how true religion has always been threatened by the demonic and heretical temptations of paganism and idolatry, or narrate the gradual triumph of rationality and science over occult and irrational superstitions, and so on.[36] The crucial weakness of all such

[34] Schönberg, *Moses und Aron*, II. Akt, 5. Szene. Significantly, these are the last words of the libretto that were put to music; Schönberg did not manage to solve the problem and finish the opera.

[35] I am referring to Schönberg's consistent references to 'der Gedanke': God can be thought but not spoken, let alone imagined or pictured.

[36] For some examples of how pro-esoteric and anti-esoteric narratives grounded

narratives is that they fail to critically differentiate between mnemohistory and historiography, that is to say: between how "paganism" and all that it implies has been *imagined* (mnemohistorically) within the context of anti-pagan polemics, and how it has actually *functioned* (historically) in the history of western religion. This is because they naively adopt the polemical concept as descriptive of reality; actually, however, since all polemical concepts are based upon simplification, they end up losing sight of the actual complexity of historical developments.

Perhaps the best example—although many could be given—is the Platonic tradition, and Neoplatonism in particular. Obviously its foundations are entirely different from biblical monotheism, but it does have deep roots in the cosmotheistic alternative, and no scholar would deny its crucial importance to the history of western esotericism. Nevertheless, it simply would not do to create some grand narrative in which (Neo)platonism is therefore wholly on the side of esotericism, while being rejected by its enemies. As is well known, Platonism actually became crucial to the emergence of Christian theology from an early stage on; and moreover it could be, and frequently was, interpreted in such a manner that it ended up strongly supporting the drive toward abstraction and otherworldliness discussed above as typical of monotheism. The revival of Neoplatonism in the fifteenth century, so crucial to the emergence of early modern esotericism, could perhaps be interpreted (along Frances Yates' lines) as an attempt at reviving the cosmotheistic "religion of the world"; but one cannot imagine how any such attempt would have had any chance of success, had Neoplatonism not already been deeply embedded in Christian theology and philosophy itself.[37] Neoplatonism could function as a kind of ambiguous "philosophy of mediation" that lent itself to monotheistic as well as cosmotheistic interpretations, and most importantly, to all kinds of hybrids between

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in the Grand Polemical Narrative have influenced major scholarly understandings of western esotericism, see Hanegraaff, 'On the Construction'.

[37] Resurgences of Neoplatonism as a non-Christian, consistently pagan religion did exist in the fifteenth century, with Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and a figure such as Gemistos Plethon as important examples; and in both cases we find a clear and explicit rejection of asceticism and otherworldliness (for that aspect, see e.g. Godwin, *Pagan Dream*, ch. 2; and Burns, 'Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster'). But the *Hypnerotomachia* has always remained an anomaly standing entirely on its own; and Plethon has influenced later developments only because of his impact on a Christian Neoplatonist like Ficino, who tended much more strongly toward an ascetic perspective (see Hanegraaff, 'Under the Mantle of Love').

the two extremes. It allowed an otherworldly mysticism to imperceptibly blend into natural magic, spirit into matter, or angels into demons; and images could be simultaneously revelatory and dangerous, depending on where an author put the emphasis at any given moment.

In short: in actual history we do not find any simple distinction between a cosmotheistic esotericism and a monotheistic exotericism. What we find instead is an extremely complex pattern of cultural and religious interactions based upon a "deep structure" of conflict between the dynamics of two mutually exclusive systems: monotheism and cosmotheism, and all that they imply.[38] The logical incompatibility of the two systems has led to an endless series of creative attempts to overcome it. In these developments the status of images has always been crucial, because they are basic to the very nature of cosmotheism, whereas their rejection is fundamental to the very nature of monotheism.

3. *Knowledge: Clarity versus Ambiguity*

Cosmotheism implies that by means of images one can get quite literally in touch with heavenly reality—statues may be adorned, washed, venerated, fed, addressed, like living beings—whereas radical monotheism implies that anything as concrete and bodily as an image is necessarily out of touch with this reality. Again, radical monotheism implies that in order to get in contact with what is ultimately real, one needs to make a radical jump beyond anything seen, imagined, or even imaginable; cosmotheism suggests, by contrast, that reality is right here: mysteriously, it both reveals and conceals itself in things that can be seen and touched (as well as heard, smelled, or tasted).

The basic idea that images are deceptive and that the quest for knowledge therefore requires a process of abstraction may have deep roots in monotheism, but it has been greatly amplified, to say the least, by the impact of philosophical rationalism. Historically and theoretically, of course, these two must be clearly distinguished, but in the mnemohistory of western culture they have frequently joined forces, and have come to be associated with one another to such an extent that their opposites are now instinctively perceived as amounting to

[38] My distinction between radical monotheism and cosmotheism should be understood along "Lovejovian" lines (see note 19), in terms of ideal types with their own inherent logic.

one and the same thing: thus pagans are stereotypically imagined as engaged in strange "irrational" rites, whereas monotheists are credited with a "rational" faith. Hence my concern here (as before) is not with the historiographical complexities of how philosophical rationalism has emerged, and how this development has interacted with the development of monotheism: clearly a large monograph would scarcely be sufficient to do some justice to these questions. In this article, I rather ask myself in general terms what is *structurally* the trouble with images from a rationalist perspective.

As my main point of reference here I propose to look at the case of St. Augustine. In book VIII of the *City of God* he famously attacked Hermes Trismegistus for having defended the "animation of images" in the *Asclepius*, and he did so with arguments derived from the basic monotheistic rejection of idolatry. To this I will return. But images were attacked by Augustine from a rationalist perspective, as well, as becomes clear from another of his main works, *On Christian Doctrine*. His argument in Book II is based upon a semiotic theory which assumes that signs have only one legitimate use, that is to say, the transfer of a rational concept from one mind to another.[39] Demons, Augustine argues, are not interested in conceptual clarity but in confusing the minds of human beings and thereby lead them on the road towards perdition; therefore, instead of using clear and unambiguous *words*, they prefer to make use of the inherent unclarity and ambiguity of *images*. Images tempt the viewer into believing that they communicate some mysterious "meaning", and make him curious to discover it. But in fact the viewer will find himself disappointed and deceived, for the communication by means of the image always remains incomplete: the viewer keeps trying to understand what the image really "means", but never reaches a clear and final understanding. Instead, all the time the demons are using the image to lure the viewer ever farther away from clarity and truth toward obscurity and error. For Augustine, then, interest in images for their own sake leads inevitably to the sins of idolatry, superstition, and idle curiosity. As formulated by Claire Fanger: 'the diviner, the curious or superstitious person, looks to the sign as thing rather than to the

[39] I follow Claire Fanger's reading of this chapter in her dissertation *Signs of Power*; but cf. also Markus, 'Augustine on Magic'. Interestingly, Markus complements Fanger's interpretation by emphasizing an essentially Durkheimian distinction between "public" and "private" semiotic systems.

thing the sign stands for, just as idolaters look to the statue of a god, to creature rather than Creator'.[40]

What we find here is an argument with origins that can be traced as far back as Plato's linguistic dialogue *Cratylus*,[41] and that has kept recurring in theories of the image in western culture up to the very present. For example, it is fascinating to see how Augustine's perspective is restated with literally the same arguments (only the demons are missing, or at least, they are not visible…) by an influential contemporary scholar on images such as W. J. T. Mitchell. He finds images dangerous 'because they are difficult to understand and inherently deceptive':[42] they present themselves 'under a deceptive cloak of naturalness and transparency […] which, however, hides an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification'.[43]

From a rationalist perspective only discursive language (reading and writing) can be trusted; the signs of such a language derive their meaning from social convention, not from some direct, "natural" connection with the things to which they refer.[44] Hence images cannot have a direct

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[40] Fanger, *Signs of Power*, ch. 'Inventing the Grand Dichotomy: St Augustine, Signs and Superstition'.

[41] The point at issue here is well summarized by Allison Coudert: although Plato ended up rejecting the idea of a natural language 'in which the shapes and sounds of letters indicated the essential nature of things', many later readers forgot his conclusions and focused on isolated statements that suggested the idea of a language that would be a direct mirror of nature (Coudert, 'Some Theories of a Natural Language', 65).

[42] '[…] weil sie schwer durchschaubar und auf Täuschung angelegt sind' (Mitchell, 'Was ist ein Bild?', 18, here quoted according to Bräunlein, 'Bildakte', 201).

[43] '[…] trügerisch im Gewand von Natürlichkeit und Transparenz […], hinter der sich aber ein opaker, verzerrender, willkürlicher Mechanismus der Repräsentation, ein Prozess ideologischer Mystifikation verbirgt' (ibid.). Another excellent example of how the clarity of the word is contrasted with the vagueness and ambiguity of images I found in the Dutch Calvinist Marnix of St. Aldegonde (1540–1598), whose anti-Catholic satires were extremely influential in their time. At one point he notes that portraits of Christ are 'so different from one another […] that they do not at all seem to be drawn after the same person, [but] nevertheless all represent the original patron of the imagination, after whom they are modeled so well that nothing is missing in them except the word: something that results without doubt from the virtue of our salemitic tincture [Marnix's metaphor for the pernicious influence of Roman Catholic "superstition"], which has this property of making all ideas, no matter how different from one another, appear exactly the way one wants to imagine them' (Marnix von St. Aldegonde, *Tableau*, 366). In short: because they are images, not words, all paintings of Christ actually represent the "original patron of the imagination", that is to say the Devil himself.

[44] Hence the basic distinction between signifier and signified associated with Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, but ultimately reflecting Plato's *Cratylus*, and used e.g. by Brian Vickers to distinguish "science" from "the occult": 'In the scientific tradition

meaning in and of themselves; any meaning they might have must be capable of being clearly translated into discursive language, without leaving an untranslatable residue. Of course, this strictly speaking makes the image superfluous: it means that anything an image can do, words can do better. Concern with images for their own sake, and the idea that an image may convey a meaning that resists verbalization, is routinely associated with the sphere of "magic, mysticism, and the irrational"—in earlier centuries, such as Augustine's time, but also in many academic discussions of visual culture up to the very present.[45] The case of St. Augustine shows that the distrust of images has both a religious *and* a philosophical dimension: religiously, images are associated with the worship of idols rejected since the times of the Hebrew Bible, and philosophically this is further underpinned by an argument that rejects their inherent ambiguity and unclarity as irrational and *therefore* as leading toward the demonic.

In a classic article first published in 1948,[46] the art historian Ernst Gombrich discussed the same basic opposition between those who see the image as inherently meaningful, and those for whom images are merely conventional signs whose meaning can (and must) be translated into discursive language. Gombrich showed very convincingly that the position that had been condemned by Augustine is of fundamental importance for understanding the art of the Renaissance. While Augustine associated conceptual clarity with truth, others argued, on the contrary, that reason and discursive language are inadequate for grasping and conveying the highest religious and philosophical verities. Along Neoplatonic lines (again), they distinguished between three levels of knowledge: the lowest is that of sense perception, a higher level is that of reason, but the highest knowledge is gained by means of "intellectual intuition", in which we directly perceive the Ideas in the divine Mind.[47] As long as we are living in the body, we can only achieve such

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[…] a clear distinction is made between words and things and between literal and metaphorical language. The occult tradition does not recognize this distinction: Words are treated as if they are equivalent to things and can be substituted for them' (Vickers, 'Analogy versus Identity', 95).

[45] See e.g. Bräunlein, 'Bildakte', 202: 'Contact with images is delegated to the domain of the non-logical, the irrational, the magical, writing and reading to the domain of the rational' (and note the quasi-automatic assumption, typical of the Grand Polemical Narrative and not problematized by Bräunlein, that the non-logical, the irrational, and the magical amount to one and the same thing).

[46] Gombrich, *'Icones Symbolicae'*.

[47] Gombrich, *'Icones Symbolicae'*, 170.

superior knowledge, or gnosis,[48] in rare moments of mystical ecstasy. In his great dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato had spoken in this context of the divine "frenzies" (*furores*): "altered states of consciousness"—as we might call them nowadays—which may be induced by listening to music or poetry, by participating in religious rituals, and—most relevant to us—by contemplating physical beauty.[49] Hence a beautiful image beheld in this lower material world can cause us to enter a state of "ecstasy" in which we are transported beyond the senses and beyond the rational mind, right to the world of the divine ideas, where we behold the original, perfect beauty of which the earthly image is merely an imperfect reflection.[50]

From such a Neoplatonic perspective, it was natural to draw conclusions that were diametrically opposed to Augustine's position. That images cannot be reduced to conceptual language did not mean that they were instruments of demons; on the contrary, it meant that they gave access to a "higher" divine level of knowledge, or gnosis, that went beyond the senses and beyond reason and conceptual language. Conceptual language was clearly best suited to the created, temporal world: after all, in order to express any truth by means of words, we need a lot of time. In contrast, images were superior means of accessing a level of reality that was beyond temporality: we are able to behold even a very complex image in the "flash" of a single moment, quite similar to the flash of "intellectual intuition" in which we behold the eternal divine ideas. Hence the idea that the aesthetic experience may actually be a divine disclosure.

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[48] For reasons further explained in an article forthcoming in a volume edited by Jan Veenstra, I consider the term "gnosis" perfectly applicable here. Renaissance defenders of "intellectual intuition", or equivalent terms, did not use the term for the simple reason that "Gnosticism" was still a wholly negative category in that period (the first apology of Gnosticism was written by Abraham von Franckenberg in 1629 and did not get published until 1703; see Gilly, 'Das Bekenntnis zur Gnosis', 416–422). Likewise, Ficino in his seminal translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was clearly unaware of the special connotations of the term "gnosis", and translated it simply as "cognitio".

[49] Plato, *Phaedrus* 244–245c, 249d–e. Plato in fact discusses four "frenzies": the erotic, hieratic, prophetic, and poetic. His own term *manía* has mostly been translated as *furor* in Latin. The usual English term "madness" or "frenzy" is problematic because it evokes associations with insanity and other unwelcome states, whereas Plato's *manía* had very positive connotations. I would argue that the modern term "altered states of consciousness" (ASCs) comes very close to what is actually meant; although this term emerged in the 1960s and is strongly associated with the "psychedelic revolution", the domain it covers is by no means restricted to states induced by psychedelic substances.

[50] Cf. the famous description of that vision by Diotima, in Plato, *Symposium* 210e–211b.

In sum, what we have found is a second basic conflict centered on images. At stake here is not the opposition between a monotheistic and a cosmotheistic worldview, but the opposition between two incompatible perspectives on knowledge, truth, and communication. The first one holds that any true knowledge must be expressible by means of clear and unambiguous propositions, which can be communicated from one mind to another without leaving an untranslatable residue. The second holds that ultimate truth is beyond us, is therefore mysterious by definition, and resists such communication: true knowledge is a gnosis that cannot be spoken, but may be suggested, hinted at, or even triggered, by means of images. The very same opposition was famously expressed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*: 'What *can* be shown, *can* not be said'.[51] And very significantly, the truth that cannot be spoken but only *shows* itself by images was characterized by Wittgenstein as "mystical" ('The unspeakable does indeed exist. It *shows* itself, it is the mystical'):[52] a famous statement that, in associating images directly with "the mystical", once again reflects the power of the Grand Polemical Narrative.

4. *Power*

So far we have identified two deep structures of western religion and culture. They rest on different foundations and answer to a different internal logic, but both—each for their own reasons—have a very serious problem with images. Either by joining forces or by working in parallel, they have contributed to the development in the collective imagination of an ever-expanding domain of the "other" which contains essentially everything we nowadays associate with "western esotericism". But to better explain *why* this has happened, we have to look at a third and final dimension, which is somewhat different in nature. It does not rely on an opposition between two logically incompatible alternatives,

[51] 'Was gezeigt werden *kann*, *kann* nicht gesagt werden' (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.1212). On Wittgenstein's theory of images and how his own understanding of "Bilder" has often been misunderstood by English-speaking philosophers due to translation problems, see Janik & Toulmin, *Wittgensteins Wien*, 246–250.

[52] 'Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies *zeigt* sich, es ist das Mystische' (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.522; on "the mystical" cf. also *Tractatus* 6.44 and 6.45). Of course, see also the famous closing statement, *Tractatus* 7: 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen'. Janik & Toulmin emphasize Wittgenstein's belief that the domain of what can only be shown needs to be protected from those who attempt to put it into words (*Wittgensteins Wien*, 264).

both of which can (and do) have their defenders and their opponents, but is grounded in one single fact acknowledged (grudgingly or not) by all parties: that is to say, that images have *power*. This basic fact is eloquently stated by David Freedberg at the outset of his book appropriately titled (and subtitled) *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*:

> People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do. They do so in societies we call primitive and in modern societies; in East and West, in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. [...] My concern is with those responses that are subject to repression because they are too embarrassing, too blatant, too rude, and too uncultured; because they make us aware of our kinship with the unlettered, the coarse, the primitive, the undeveloped; and because they have psychological roots that we prefer not to acknowledge.[53]

I would add that the human response to images is in fact a double one. People respond to images in the various ways listed by Freedberg, but they may also respond to that very fact; I will refer to these two levels as "primary" and "secondary" response. Thus people may simply respond to certain images with positive feelings such as pleasure and relief (primary response); but they may also feel such power of images, and yet resist giving in to it (secondary response). And the reverse is true as well: people may respond to certain images with negative feelings such as fear or disgust (primary response); but they may also feel those emotions and yet resist giving in to them (secondary response). But no matter how and why, respond they all do: we may safely assume that psychological immunity to the power of images is a merely theoretical possibility. Many explanations might be adduced for the power of our "primary" response to images, but fascinating though they may be, I will not go into them here. More directly relevant to our present concerns is the "secondary" response, for it is on this level that anti-image polemics are played out.

The power of images leads us right back to the monotheistic rejection of idolatry. A peculiar fact about much that has been written on

[53] Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 1.

that subject is that most authors tend to concentrate their attention more or less exclusively on the dimension that I discussed in the first section above—aniconism, often leading to iconoclasm, as grounded in doctrines about God's radical alterity—, and are able to write large and highly erudite studies of idolatry and iconoclasm that only cursorily touch upon, or even wholly neglect, a dimension of the problem that has in fact always been crucial, and that constitutes a very specific manifestation of the experienced power of images: the concept that they may somehow be *animated*.[54]

The neglect of this aspect I find nothing short of amazing. It is simply not correct that monotheists and philosophers reject images only because of their theoretical conviction (however important) that God cannot and should not be represented, or that images confuse the clarity of rational discussion. On the contrary, the Second Commandment is directed against a very concrete religious practice of worshiping images that were supposed to be literally inhabited, possessed, or animated by gods; and in countless later examples of anti-image polemics, the target likewise consists of animated objects.[55] In order to understand the response to images, we therefore cannot remain on the level of theory only, but have to come to terms with the weird, uncanny feeling of "presence" that may be conveyed by images of gods or demons, or even of human beings, particularly in a sacral or ritualized setting. This third aspect of our problem should be sharply distinguished from the issues

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[54] A good example of semi-blindness to this dimension of the problem is the otherwise quite interesting study by Besançon, *Forbidden Image*: the fact that it is presented as an "intellectual history" cannot be an excuse for the fact that this author wholly neglects the ritual dimension of idol-worship as a vital dimension of "pagan" religious practice and thus essentially reduces the problem to a philosophical and theological one; his treatment of the animation of statues is limited to a few pages without original insights, and leaves the impression that he merely feels obliged to mention the subject but has no real interest in it (op. cit., 55–57). Likewise, Halbertal & Margalit, in one of the very few existing attempts at a systematic treatment of "idolatry" (the scarcity of such studies is remarkable in itself), devote only one chapter to "idolatrous practice" and manage to do so without ever mentioning or touching upon the animation of statues (Halbertal & Margalit, *Idolatry*).

[55] Much material for the later medieval and early modern period is to be found in Weill-Parot, *Les "images astrologiques"*. For particularly interesting discussions from the perspective of art history, see the opening chapters of Camille, *The Gothic Idol*. The Reformation is of course very rich in polemics against statues of Mary, the Saints, or Jesus that are believed to exhibit signs of life such as moving and bleeding; interestingly, however, discussions of Protestant aniconism and iconoclasm usually refer to the biblical interdict against images in general terms, and neglect to discuss this specific aspect of the problem.

of representation and (an)iconicity discussed earlier, which traditionally dominate discussions of idolatry and iconoclasm. One obvious reason for this is the fact that it is perfectly possible to make images of God, or prohibit such images, without it being implied that such images are actually inhabited or animated by God. Another reason is that the experience of "power" and "presence" is not necessarily linked to representation, as evident from non-iconic objects traditionally referred to as "fetishes", which function very much in the same manner as iconic "idols". And yet another reason is that objects (whether iconic or not) may be believed to be animated by all kinds of beings, not only by God or by gods. In short, if one reduces the discussion of monotheism largely or exclusively to issues of representation and (an)iconicity, one neglects the fact that the monotheistic rejection of images was directed at least partly against something much more specific, which pertains to practice rather than to belief.

We are dealing here with a phenomenon of "pre-rational",[56] primary response, not with a product of doctrinal conviction. For example, one may walk into a Roman Catholic cathedral and come by a chapel devoted to the Virgin Mary. Worshippers are seated on benches, silently praying in the direction of a statue of the Virgin that is placed in the middle of the altar. Regardless of one's personal beliefs, or lack of them, it is very difficult in such a context to remain entirely immune (or pretend that one is immune) to the experience of presence: at the very least, one can readily understand the feeling that "something" is there on the altar, where the statue is standing. Theologians may be worried about such a sentiment, and find it important to point out that the image is not actually animated by the Virgin but merely symbolizes her. But among Roman Catholics at least, many of them will nevertheless hesitate to state unequivocally that only a wooden artifact is present, nothing more—for doesn't it have to be true that where the faithful are gathered around her image in such a sacred setting, Mary herself is somehow present? It seems to me that in taking the more radical step of rejecting such statues and images altogether, Protestants showed their awareness of how natural such considerations

[56] The reference to Lévy-Bruhl's famous (or notorious) theory of "pre-logical" mentality is intentional. I am fully aware of the criticisms against his work, but while certain aspects of his approach and terminology are now dated, the theoretical core of his work I consider of lasting importance. On my arguments in this regard, see Hanegraaff, 'How Magic Survived', 371–377.

are: they realized that doctrinal conviction, no matter how strong and explicit, is simply no match for the experienced power of the image. It is inevitable that statues of Mary or the saints will be "animated" by the faithful, for such a response just happens to come naturally to human beings; and therefore idolatry can only be avoided by doing away with images altogether.[57]

Of course, if the spontaneous and almost imperceptible animation of images is already such a sensitive issue, anti-image polemics get all the more radical whenever images are *explicitly* said to be animated by some divine or demonic soul or presence. The classic reference here is the *Asclepius*, where Hermes Trismegistus famously praises the Egyptian practice of "drawing down" the gods into the temple statues. St. Augustine's attack on this passage, in Book VIII of *The City of God against the Pagans*, became a *locus classicus* of the anti-idolatry discourse in western culture, and is of crucial importance not only to the reception history of Hermetism in the middle ages and the Renaissance, but also to the development of magical and anti-magical discourse in the same period.[58] As is well known, complex ritual procedures for animating divine statues were a stock feature of the religions of the ancient Middle East, notably Mesopotamia and Egypt;[59] likewise the animation of statues was a crucial, if still insufficiently understood, element of Neoplatonic theurgy;[60] and of course, structurally similar or identical procedures are still central to eastern religions such as Hinduism.[61] In short, we are dealing with one of the most important dimensions of how the "pagan idolatry" rejected by monotheism actually functioned; but this dimension is essentially ritualistic rather than doctrinal—it is

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[57] In line with the basic monotheistic perspective, something "alien" to basic human psychology is therefore expected of the worshippers of the true God in a Protestant context; Roman Catholics are accused of giving in to "natural" impulses by means of which they are unsuspectingly lured back into paganism.

[58] For the medieval reception of Hermetism, and the debate about Hermes' defense of idolatry, see Lucentini & Perrone Compagni, 'Hermetic Literature II'. For a preliminary discussion of the relation between magic and animated statues in the Renaissance context, see Hanegraaff, 'Sympathy or the Devil'.

[59] On the animation of images in the ancient Near East, see e.g. Dick, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*. A very useful collection of articles on aspects of the conflict with Israelite monotheism is Van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book*.

[60] On the importance of this aspect, known as *telestikè*, see the famous appendix on theurgy in Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*. See also Boyance, 'Théurgie et télestique'.

[61] See e.g. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, and Waghorne & Cutler, *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone*.

concerned with the practical question of how to convey divine power to an image, rather than with the theoretical issue of iconicity versus aniconism—and it is perhaps for that reason that it has tended to be overlooked or marginalized in discussions of the nature of monotheism, idolatry, and iconoclasm.

The ritual animation of images as a central feature of "pagan idolatry" survived in western culture notably in the use of amulets and talismans.[62] In both cases, after all, we are dealing with material artifacts that are supposedly "charged" with invisible power. The power in question is usually seen as astrological in nature, but of course the stars were frequently associated with entities such as angels or demons; therefore to charge an amulet or talisman with "magical" power implied drawing down mysterious powers into the object, in a manner that is structurally similar to e.g. Middle Eastern "mouth-opening" rituals,[63] and was indeed perceived as analogous to such practices by theological critics. In short: image magic was naturally associated with idolatry, and just as the heathen idols were supposedly animated by pagan gods, amulets and talismans were animated by angels or demons (interpreted as demons in disguise by critics). Again, this dimension of the anti-image polemics has its origin in the monotheistic rejection of idolatry, but has little or nothing to do with the theological issue of God's unimaginable nature. It constitutes a third, structurally autonomous dimension of western anti-image polemics.

To trace the ramifications of the "animation of images" and its rejection through the history of western culture, and discuss the relevance of both to the history of western esotericism, would require much more space than is available here. Suffice it to say that they are of central importance to notions of "real symbolism" in Renaissance magic, for example in Ficino and Agrippa, and to the relation between art and magic in the same period: again and again we find ourselves confronted with ideas about the "talismanic" power of images (from magical sigils to complex works of art) to draw down celestial, demonic, or divine souls and powers, so that these images are supposed to be animated (or "possessed") by them in the most literal sense of the word.[64] Furthermore the idea of a material vehicle being magically animated

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[62] The indispensable reference is now Weill-Parot, *Les "images astrologiques"*.

[63] For an excellent analysis of Mesopotamian mouth-washing rituals (which always included mouth-openings) see Berlejung, 'Washing the Mouth'.

[64] See Hanegraaff, 'Sympathy or the Devil'.

by a "soul" or other invisible force was obviously problematic, to say the least, from the perspective of scientific materialism as well. Hence we find that it figures prominently in the imagination of "the occult" since the Enlightenment, and even found its way into the theoretical edifice of the anthropology of religion.[65] Thus the theme is relevant not only to some of the most central currents of western esotericism in the medieval and early modern period, but also to how the Grand Polemical Narrative eventually construed this entire domain as *das Andere der Vernunft*. The full history of the animation of images in western culture still remains to be written.

5. *Conclusions: The Trouble with Esotericism*

I have emphasized that the power of images is not something attributed to them by theoretical (philosophical or theological) considerations, but constitutes a spontaneous, "primary" response; the phenomenon might be accounted for in various ways, psychological or otherwise, but this is not my concern here. In contrast to the primary response, the secondary response to images—should we resist them? or should we rather welcome them, and perhaps use their power to our advantage?—is heavily conditioned by cultural factors, and in the western context more specifically by monotheistic and rationalist discourse. Against this background it is possible now, albeit cautiously, to draw some conclusions that have a bearing on the question of what it is that defines western esotericism as a field of research.

If I am correct that the category "western esotericism" is at bottom an imaginal construct, developed by the Grand Polemical Narrative of western culture as the "other" against which it defines its own ideal identity; if, furthermore, monotheism and rationalism are accepted as the major pillars of this identity; and if, finally, both are characterized by the trouble they have with images; then it may not be too far-fetched to see a *positive* secondary response to the power of images as a major characteristic of western esotericism. In doing so, we may make a cautious first step from a merely indirect definition of western esotericism

[65] See my extensive discussion of how and why the animation of physical objects is a central problem in the work of E. B. Tylor, and crucially undermines his theoretical distinction between religion and magic (Hanegraaff, 'The Emergence of the Academic Science of Magic').

toward a direct one. We can make a further step by suggesting that specific persons and currents are more likely to end up being perceived as belonging to the "other" if—for whatever reason—they exhibit substantial resistance against the normative drift of the dominant polemical narratives, and develop perspectives tending toward cosmotheism and toward a perception of truth as inherently mysterious and accessible only by a supra-rational gnosis. The crucial thing here is not to give in to the perennial temptation of reifying such categories and thereby falling back into a simplistic opposition of esoteric cosmotheists believing in irrational gnosis on the one hand, pitted against exoteric monotheists believing in reason and science on the other: just one look at such a black-and-white scheme should be sufficient to show that it cannot possibly do justice to the complex identities of the historical actors involved on both sides. Nevertheless, if it is correct that western culture defines its identity on a monotheistic and rationalist foundation, it is reasonable to assume that to the extent that someone tends more strongly toward their theoretical opposites, he runs a larger risk—statistically, one might say—of finding himself and his ideas or practices censured and relegated to the domain of the "other".

To sum all this up very briefly, and without all the careful qualifications: my thesis is that the elements of "cosmotheism" and "gnosis" are most crucial to understanding the dynamics of how the Grand Polemical Narrative has construed the domain of "western esotericism"; and against that backdrop, it is the experienced power of images that causes this domain to be perceived as dangerous.

Finally, what would be the implications of the above for methodology in the study of western esotericism? If the trouble with images is as central as I have suggested, it is logical to conclude—as recently done e.g. by Kocku von Stuckrad—that the study of western esotericism must integrate the perspective of a "new science of images" (*neue Bildwissenchaft*).[66] Although I fully agree with this new emphasis on images, I am somewhat skeptical about the possibilities of actually creating a "new science" of them. I can illustrate my reasons by once again quoting Jan Assmann, who emphasizes that the cosmotheistic perspective has become extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible, for us to understand: 'But what the world of gods of a polytheistic religion is, we cannot even understand yet, let alone believe in it. First

[66] Von Stuckrad, 'Visible Gods'.

of all we must realize that after more than 2000 years of monotheism we have lost this understanding'.[67] Some might find such a statement exaggerated, but I think that Assmann has a point. The problem is that this difficulty of understanding is *not* an intellectual one: as I hope to have shown, it is not too difficult to describe the basic oppositions in theoretical terms that can be grasped by the intellect. The real difficulty lies in the fact that the very concern of intellectuals and of academic research in general with sharp theoretical and abstract distinctions is *itself* a legacy, and hence a reflection, of the implicitly monotheistic and rationalistic anti-image discourse of western culture, so that the tools being used might simply not fit the object of research. I suspect that this might be the real reason why a *neue Bildwissenschaft* is so remarkably difficult to realize: there is much agreement about the need for it, but the major players in this domain all seem to agree in emphasizing that, in spite of all efforts and all the talk about an "iconic turn", in fact it still does not really exist.[68]

Against the background of my earlier discussion, it seems to me that academic scholarship is reasonably adequate in dealing with images as long as the discussion falls within the broad domain of the monotheistic and rationalistic discourse (that is to say, including their polemical opposites of idolatry and the supra-rational), but has real problems dealing with the third dimension, the "power of images", because here we are dealing with a primary response that is based not in theory but in experience and practice. I suspect that the epistemological tools of verbal abstraction and theorizing might be about as useful here as binoculars are to the study of music or a microphone to the study of paintings. If this is correct, then in spite of the best of intentions, the

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[67] Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung*, 60 ('Was aber die Götterwelt einer polytheistischen Religion ist, das können wir noch nicht einmal verstehen, geschweige denn daran glauben. Wir müssen zunächst einmal einsehen, daß uns dieses Verständnis nach mehr als 2000 Jahren Monotheismus abhanden gekommen ist').

[68] Peter Bräunlein admits that 'In spite of the fact that practitioners of cultural studies show an almost obsessive interest in visuality and visual perception, answers to the question "what is an image?" remain remarkably diverse—indeed, they are of a bewildering variety'; and he continues by quoting similar conclusions by Gottfried Boehm ('In vain do we search for a developed "Theory of Images" or "Science of Images"' [Boehm, 'Die Bilderfrage', 326]) and Hans Belting ('A general theory of visual media does not yet exist' [Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie*, 14]). No less disappointing is the case of W. J. T. Mitchell's "critical iconology": 'In spite of his book with that title, Mitchell does not give us a systematically developed theory of images; rather, as he writes himself, it is pieced together like a photo album, a collection of snapshots of specific problems related to "representation"' (Bräunlein, o.c., 206).

project of an academically rigorous "science of images" is in fact a *contradictio in terminis*, and will therefore inevitably turn into an instrument for promoting and perpetuating the agendas of the western anti-image discourse rather than giving us a new perspective on images. It might well be that, when all is said and done, there is simply no other way of understanding images "on their own terms" than by following Wittgenstein's advice, disappointing though it may be: remain silent about what cannot be spoken but can only be shown.

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BETWEEN HERESY AND ORTHODOXY: ALCHEMY AND PIETY IN LATE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

Hanns-Peter Neumann

1. *Introduction*

When we observe the cultural and religious development in Germany in the second half of the sixteenth century, we find, on the one hand, a plurality of seemingly subversive religious movements and religiously subversive intellectuals, and, on the other hand, the attempts by various Protestant churches to formulate and establish their dogmatic belief system in order to give their church an unmistakable profile. Behind the manifold theological disputes and discussions lies the intention of bringing forth the one and only correct interpretation of Christian faith, doctrine, and life in accordance with the office of the Church. Consequently, only within orthodox ecclesiastical discourse we meet a labyrinth of theological writings which are apologetic, polemic, or dogmatic, while on the contrary, outside of the inner-orthodox discourse we discover a harsh criticism of the Church, its clerical institutions, and its theologians. Both tendencies are closely related to one another and result from what scholars have referred to as the crisis of faith or the crisis of piety in the second half of the sixteenth century.[1] One might also speak of a crisis of credibility concerning church officials and theologians, who were often believed to be merely professing a Christian belief, but not practicing it. Due to this situation, the demand for *reformation of the Reformation* became irresistible and often transcended the opposition between the two categories "heresy" and "orthodoxy", which themselves are by no means unproblematic. The major difficulty

[1] See Sparn, 'Die Krise der Frömmigkeit und ihr theologischer Reflex im nachreformatorischen Luthertum', 54–82; Zeller, 'Die "Alternde Welt" und die "Morgenröte im Aufgang"', 1–13. However, Johann Anselm Steiger in his book on *Johann Gerhard (1582–1637)*, 60, argues against the existence of any such crisis of piety. Steiger emphasizes that mystical piety must also be seen as part of an 'inner-orthodox process of interpretation' (*innerorthodoxer Auslegungsprozeß*) and self-definition, hence a process that is not necessarily strictly contradictory to orthodox patterns.

here is the fact that these categories were usually polemical constructions deployed within different discourses.[2] Officials and theologians of the Church were as readily called heretics by "heretics" as opinions and attitudes of seemingly subversive individuals were called heretical by orthodox theologians. While the designation "orthodox" normally referred to agreement with or opposition to a specific doctrine, for instance the *Institutio Christianae Religionis* of Calvin, and concerned the legal status of one's faith in accordance or disagreement with a specific theology, the designation "heretical" pertained, rather, to the contrast of piety and impiety, which is less formal and appears to be a more spiritual and emotional category.

Apart from this, there were many authors who fundamentally questioned the belief in humanistic education as a value in itself and the belief in specific philosophical and medical written traditions based on the works of Aristotle and Galen, which were considered authoritative. Referring to Paul's basic opposition of letter and spirit, most critics of the authority of books and of the adherence to scholarship relied more on their own spiritual and natural experience than on written words or philological studies. Scientific investigation was understood in a similar fashion: nature was considered a book whose spirit must be investigated by experiment and by one's own reading experience rather than by books reflecting traditional theories of natural philosophy. Based on experience and experiment alone, scientific investigation can lead, but need not lead, to the separation of science and religion. Paracelsians, for instance, saw scientific investigation as an important part of religion, i.e. a part that was considered the magical realm of natural theology.[3] For them, the Book of Nature and Holy Scripture corresponded to

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[2] Cf. the different definitions of heresy that were current in the second half of the sixteenth century, for instance those of Heinrich Bullinger in his *Haußbuch*, of Jean Calvin in his *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra trinitate contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Servetis*, and of Théodore de Bèze in his *De haereticis a civili magistratu puniendis libellus* [...]. A short summary of the different definitions of heresy is provided by Voogt, *Constraint on Trial*, 146–151. The famous case of the accused, condemned, and executed heretic Michael Servetus (Miguel Servet) as reason for the debate on religious tolerance is discussed in Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio*, 80–171.

[3] For Paracelsus and Paracelsianism see Dopsch et al. (eds.), *Paracelsus*; Gause, *Paracelsus*; Gilly, 'Theophrastia Sancta'; Goldammer, 'Paracelsische Eschatologie'; Pagel, *Das medizinische Weltbild des Paracelsus*; Schott & Zinguer (eds.), *Paracelsus und seine internationale Rezeption in der frühen Neuzeit*; Telle, 'Paracelsus als Alchemiker'; Telle (ed.), *Analecta Paracelsica*; Telle (ed.), *Parerga Paracelsisca*; Weeks, *Paracelsus*; Zimmermann (ed.), *Paracelsus*.

each other. Therefore, they cannot be contradictory. It is an axiom of Paracelsianism that there is a necessary correspondence between divine wisdom, the Book of Nature, and the inner core of the human soul as a measurement of every single truth. As a social phenomenon Paracelsianism can be defined as an ideological movement based on what I like to call "spiritual experimentalism" and as a social network of people with different social and political ambitions aiming at the general reform of Christian science and society. It combined piety and natural science, especially medical alchemy, used divine inspiration as the foundation of its epistemology and, moreover, made the same efforts to reform the church from within as some church officials themselves did, but at the same time had a strong leaning toward so-called heretical tendencies. This shows the obvious complexity of Paracelsianism, a movement that was capable of connecting itself to various intellectual and social conditions.[4]

However, instead of dealing with the complex movement of Paracelsianism in the second half of the sixteenth century as a whole, I will here concentrate on just three representatives of Paracelsianism: Adam von Bodenstein, Michael Toxites, and Heinrich Khunrath, all of them convinced adherents of the medical alchemy and the theological ideas of Paracelsus. They may serve as examples of three aspects of the theological implications inherent in the relation between alchemy and piety and their connections with heresy and orthodoxy. These aspects are the following: (1) Wisdom as foundation of natural theology, alchemy, and true Christianity; (2) the relation between natural theology and criticism of the Church: reformation of the Church from within and the idea of an *ecclesia spiritualis*; (3) the role of alchemy and Hermeticism in the formative phase of Pietism.

The sources that can give us insight into these aspects are letters by Adam von Bodenstein and Michael Toxites, addressed to different people who either already were or were to become important for the dissemination of Paracelsian ideas. Both Bodenstein and Toxites attempted not only to explain Paracelsian medicine and philosophy, but also to develop a manifold strategy to replace the publicly and socially established Galenic medicine by the new Paracelsian one. In the case of Heinrich Khunrath, the main source is his famous *Amphitheatrum*

[4] For the connection between Paracelsianism and Rosicrucianism see Gilly, *Adam Haslmayr*; Kühlmann, 'Sozietät als Tagtraum'.

Sapientiae Aeternae. I regard this book as the most influential contribution to theosophy at the turn of the seventeenth century.

2. *Wisdom as Foundation of Natural Theology, Alchemy, and True Christianity*

Adam von Bodenstein, probably the most influential Paracelsian, confessed his passion for Paracelsus and for the *alchemia medica* in deeply religious terms:

> In the name of charity, I have also been awoken. And I see nothing in our times that could provide public welfare more than letting all people share in the books of Theophrastus, which are indeed tremendous treasures. I want to express his art in action. I notice daily that the art of Paracelsus is highly reliable, absolutely true, and given by God himself for the sake of humankind.[5]

As his companion *in Paracelsicis* and friend Michael Toxites, Bodenstein does not hesitate to call Paracelsus a new Moses[6] or, as most of the Paracelsians viewed him, a new German Hermes; Bodenstein even dares to compare Paracelsus with Christ himself. According to Bodenstein, with Paracelsus a new Golden Era begins in which the Adamic wisdom is to be rediscovered. Theophrastus von Hohenheim, from this perspective, stands for a dynamic knowledge of the treasures of nature as provided by the creator himself, and therefore plays an extraordinarily important role in salvation history. For Paracelsians, the restoration of the Adamic wisdom implies above all the establishment of a superior Christian science of nature, which leaves all philosophies of antiquity far behind. Thus, verity stands against antiquity, Christian doctrine against the philosophy of the heathens. Since Christian truth underlies every possible single truth, true Christians can investigate the secrets

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[5] Letter to Ludwig Wolfgang von Hapsberg, 2 July 1562, in Kühlmann & Telle (eds.), *Corpus Paracelsisticum* 1, 212: '*Hoc ut perficiatur, et ego excitatus sum qui hoc tempore nullam rem video, qua melius publica commoda possim promovere, quam si libros Theophrasti, ingentes thesauros omnibus communicem: artem factis exprimem, quam certissimam et verissimam esse ab ipsoque Deo traditam in usus hominum quotidie experior*'. All translations are mine if not noted otherwise.

[6] Cf. Toxites' letter to August von Sachsen, 1 March 1571, in Kühlmann & Telle (eds.), *Corpus Paracelsisticum* 2, 210, and the annotation by Kühlmann & Telle, 222: 'Nach Toxites besitzen die alttestamentliche Erzählung von der göttlichen Weltschöpfung und der Erschaffung des Menschen und Hohenheims *Astronomia magna* im Heiligen Geist einen gemeinsamen Urheber; Paracelsus wird mithin zu einem neuen Moses stilisiert, die *Astronomia magna* zu einer neuen *Genesis*'.

of nature more properly than any non-Christian. This is the simple argument for the necessary methodical coherence between scientific investigation and Christian faith provided by the Paracelsians. This is also the reason why the Paracelsians were radically critical of scholars of any kind, whether of medicine, philology, theology, or philosophy, whom they accused of relying on books and the doctrines of antiquity rather than on the power of scientific progress that God provides only to those who live and act faithfully, and who accordingly establish a thoroughly Christian *scientia experimentalis*. In Bodenstein's words: 'Let us flee to the eternal wisdom, the cause of all good, but not to living human beings, whose works are sinful!'[7]

As a consequence, Paracelsians understood divine wisdom to be the only key for attaining knowledge of the secrets of nature and for deciphering the signature of things. But how exactly does this process work? How can scientific progress be based on divine providence? Why and how should the eternal wisdom, which is thought to be closely associated with the Adamic wisdom, John's *logos*, King Solomon's wisdom, and Christ himself as the incarnate divine wisdom, reveal new knowledge to those who are prepared for it?

Michael Toxites writes in a letter to Count Philipp von Hanau-Lichtenberg that in order to discover the secrets of nature and its remedies it is not sufficient to consult and study books alone; insight is only achieved by experiment, hard work, and reading in the Book of Nature itself. Moreover, Toxites specifies the reason why the investigation of the secrets of nature carried out along such lines will necessarily be successful. He writes that 'in creating the world enough aid was implanted into nature and were given to nature'[8] to provide any kind of arts for the sake of humankind.

What Toxites says in his letter to Count Philipp is based strictly on the Paracelsian doctrine that God created the world by means of alchemical processes, mainly by those of separation and coagulation.[9] Through his spirit God implanted his divine wisdom in the *res creatae*. Thus, the divine wisdom acts as the dynamics of nature itself, storing

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[7] Letter to Adolf Hermann Riedesel of Eisenach, 8 February 1562, in Kühlmann & Telle (eds.), *Corpus Paracelsisticum* 1, 152: '*Confugiamus ad aeternam sapientiam omnis boni causam, non animales homines, quorum opera sunt peccata*'.

[8] Letter to Count Philipp von Hanau-Lichtenberg, 25 July 1565, in Kühlmann & Telle (eds.), *Corpus Paracelsisticum* 2, 69: '[…] ist der natur in erschaffung der welt gnugsame hülff eingepflantzet/ vund gegeben worden'.

[9] See Paracelsus, *Astronomia Magna*, 36–37.

at the same time all possible knowledge within the natural things. All parts of the created world have their own proper knowledge inside their grosser or subtler bodies. However, the whole universe is practically dominated by God's wisdom regarding the general forces within nature and the historical process in which all human beings participate. The central function of the divine wisdom for scientific investigation is altogether clear: Bodenstein and Toxites identify divine wisdom with the Christian *logos*, sometimes even with the world-soul;[10] in addition, within the Renaissance alchemical tradition there is a strong tendency to associate the philosopher's stone with Jesus Christ;[11] hence, wisdom seems to connect natural science, history, and salvation. This basic coherence of science, history, and salvation implies the necessity of piety even in the natural sciences in order to gain access to the divine wisdom and ultimately to attain knowledge. This is why the baroque alchemist and Paracelsian Heinrich Khunrath called this coherence *pia investigatio*, pious investigation: 'How do we attain Truth? Certainly not by means of silver [i.e. money], but definitely through pious investigation, assiduous prayers, and hard work in the oratory and in the laboratory'.[12]

Following a tendency of Lutheran theologians to produce new translations of the Wisdom Books of the Hebrew Bible in order to create a practical Christian ethics based on the proverbial sentences contained in these texts, Khunrath divided up every single phrase of the Wisdom Books into component parts, and subsequently reassembled them in a new order, thereby producing a set of 365 sentences. This new composition was thought to serve both as a proper introduction to a mystical way of life aiming at the *unio mystica* and at the same time as an introduction to the magical and, most importantly, practical investigation into the secrets of nature.

In Khunrath's artistically highly demanding alchemo-Hermetic and theosophical *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*, which contains famous engravings by the Dutch artists Johan Diricks van Campen, Paullus van

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[10] The analogy between world-soul and divine wisdom is implicit in a letter from Bodenstein to the doge of Venice, 29 January 1560, in Kühlmann & Telle (eds.), *Corpus Paracelsisticum* 1, 115, 123.

[11] For instance the tradition of Pseudo-Lull, and also the alchemy of Petrus Bonus; cf. Crisciani, 'The Conception of Alchemy'; Crisciani, 'Hermeticism and Alchemy'; Hoheisel, 'Christus und der philosophische Stein'.

[12] Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum*, 37 (versus 87): '*Quomodo autem emitur Veritas? nullo sane argento: sed pia investigatione, assiduis precibus; & laboribus indefessis in Oratorio & Laboratorio*'.

der Doort, and Hans Vredeman de Vries, the theater of science, as it is conceived by Khunrath, rests entirely on divine wisdom, and is in turn subdivided into three basic sciences (*scientiae*): kabbalah, magic, and alchemy. Concerning kabbalah, by which he means Christian kabbalah, Khunrath mainly refers to Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin. As for magic, he makes use of Ficino's and Paracelsus' understanding of natural magic as the practical application of cosmological knowledge and as the art of the *signatura rerum*. In the field of alchemy, Khunrath is deeply in Paracelsus' debt, but is at the same time also well acquainted with ancient and medieval alchemical traditions.[13]

In the theosophical framework of the *Amphitheatrum* Khunrath mentions three books that play a key role for the three sciences mentioned previously: the Book of the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Nature, and the Book of Man's Conscience. These three books are thought to be dynamically interconnected and to interpret each other. The implication is that every single truth must necessarily be in accordance with Holy Scripture, the Book of Nature, and the Book of Man's Conscience because they represent the past, present, and future reality. In the light of these connections, everything is seen as part of salvation history. Nature itself is considered a divine servant bringing forth divine revelation in order to provide knowledge which properly corresponds to the specific historical moment. The status of revelation due to a specific historical moment is transmitted through astrological constellations. Consequently, scientific progress, too, results from divine revelation; it uncovers in time what once was the universal knowledge of Adam beyond the limits of time.

However, for Khunrath the most important question of all is how to read these books adequately. Answering this question, Khunrath demanded that the follower of divine wisdom and its three basic sciences should follow in the footsteps of the mythical figure of King Solomon, whose piety ensured him direct divine inspiration. In addition, divine inspiration underlies experience both in matters of faith and in matters of natural science. Thus, the synthesis of oratory and laboratory, i.e. of practical piety and experimental science, was central for Khunrath, because without it there would be no guaranteed access to the key to the whole universe: the divine wisdom, the *logos*. For Khunrath, the belief in God and in Jesus Christ is the one and only condition and

[13] See Neumann, *Natura sagax*, 139–154.

guarantee of knowledge, a conviction he expressed concisely in the following passage: 'In believing you submit yourself to God. Being submitted to God, you are afraid of Him. Being afraid of God, you live in the right way. Living in the right way, you are purging your heart. With your heart being purged you will see and observe what you believe'.[14] The spiritual purging of one's own heart is evidently analogous with the alchemical procedure of distillation. The Book of the Holy Scriptures is believed to be the mirror in which human being and nature are reflected and correspond to each other.

By relating alchemy to the Christian history of creation and salvation, the alchemical process—especially the separation of the pure from the impure in order to gain the essence of something—was understood to be closely associated with the inner spiritual process of man. Alchemy, with its technical and practical proceedings, can be seen as a very pragmatic representation of the moral aspects of natural theology. We may conclude that the inclination toward practical and experimental rather than theoretical sciences also exerted an influence on the concept of natural theology, which was similarly expressed in a less theoretical and more pragmatic manner.

3. *The Relation between Natural Theology and Criticism of the Church: Reformation of the Church from within and the Idea of an* Ecclesia Spiritualis

If we define natural theology as knowledge of the divine by means of a philosophy of nature, and if nature is conceived as basically organized by divine forces, we may say that the more experimental, practical, and pragmatic philosophy of nature becomes, the more spiritual and mystical the concept of natural theology will be. By subordinating theory and the authority of books to practice, the Paracelsians showed a strong inclination toward a practical understanding of Christianity. At the same time they reveal the Paracelsian tendency of disregarding ecclesiastical dogmatism.

To further illuminate this tendency, it is interesting to look into Bodenstein's biographical background: Adam von Bodenstein was the son of the radical reformer Andreas Karlstadt. When Adam was

[14] Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum*, 69 (versus 156): '*Credendo subiugaris Deo; subiugatus, times Deum; quem timens, recte vivis; recte vivendo, cor mundas; mundo corde, quod credis, videbis*'.

thirteen, his father died and the boy was educated by the famous and powerful Zurich reformer Heinrich Bullinger. To my knowledge, however, there is no evidence that Bodenstein explicitly refers to Karlstadt or Bullinger in his works and letters.[15] On the contrary, the Paracelsian turning point in his life must certainly have offended his adoptive father Heinrich Bullinger, for whom Paracelsus had been an adherent of Arius, and therefore a heretic.[16] As a response to this, Bodenstein tried to refute the accusations made against Paracelsus and the Paracelsians by Anti-Paracelsians like Crato von Kraftheim, Thomas Erastus, and also Heinrich Bullinger.[17] What is most noticeable, however, is that, instead of limiting himself to specific Christian confessions, Bodenstein involved persons of all confessions without any preferences in his well-organized endeavors to propagate and establish the Paracelsian works and ideas. Bodenstein almost considered himself an apostle of Paracelsus; he claimed a non-denominational universal Christian religion that was based on a practical Christian way of life and which embraced an experimental pursuit of natural science—all in the name of charity.[18]

Nevertheless, from this non-denominational standpoint, but well aware of the inner-orthodox polemical discussions and disputes about dogmatic questions—for instance the meaning of the sacraments or the function of the Church and its officials—the Paracelsians criticized the

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[15] Nevertheless, Bodenstein, before his Paracelsian turning point, engaged in confessional controversies in Basle. He considered himself a strict adherent of Jean Calvin and Théodore de Bèze and accused Sebastian Castellio, the defender of Miguel Servet, of heresy.

[16] See Kühlmann & Telle (eds.), *Corpus Paracelsisticum* 1, 583: 'Diese wenig zimperliche Überhöhung des Laientheologen Paracelsus steht einerseits in schroffstem Kontrast zur Verketzerung Hohenheims, wie sie sich in den 60er Jahren etwa in Zeugnissen eines K. Gessner, J. Crato von Kraftheim, J. Oporinus, Th. Zwinger, H. Bullinger und Th. Erastus über den "Arianer" und "Atheisten" Paracelsus, dann bald schon in einer Verurteilung des Paracelsischen Werks durch die theologische Fakultät der Pariser Universität (1578) und in kirchlichen Indizierungen niederschlug'.

[17] See the letter to Ferdinand II., 24 December 1571, in Kühlmann & Telle (eds.), *Corpus Paracelsisticum* 1, 462–463: 'Erstlich sagen die widersächer Paracelsus seye dem Arrianismo angehangen/ vnnd seine verthädinger müssen auch darmit beschmeißt sein/ etc. Für mich thůnd sie mir gewalt/ dann ich profitiere Paracelsi theologiam gar nicht/ hab mehr dann genůg in meiner vocation zůschaffen: Er aber Paracelsus erzeiget sich inn seinem buch de trinitate genůgsamlich/ das er kein menschwerdung verleugnet/ etc. sonders gehalten/ wie ein redlicher Christ […]'.

[18] One could certainly suppose that Bodenstein was influenced by the mystical implications of his father's theology, but this must remain a hypothesis until the sources are properly analyzed within their theological context.

theologians and officials of the church more or less cautiously and did not consider themselves heretics. The latter is clear from Bodenstein's and Toxites' comparison of Paracelsus with Luther. Both of them called Paracelsus the "Luther of Medicine", as did other Paracelsians such as Leonard Thurneisser and Oswald Crollius. They regarded Paracelsus' reformation of medicine and of natural philosophy to be analogous to and as important as the Lutheran reformation of the church and of theology. Both reformations coincide, so they believed, with the correct interpretation of a true, i.e. above all practical, Christianity. In their diagnosis of the trends of their time, however, many Paracelsians observed and condemned the hypocrisy of orthodox theologians and church officials, just as they condemned the falseness of the Galenistic physicians. Thus, among others, Heinrich Khunrath frequently referred to Luther and to orthodox Lutherans such as Michael Neander and Johannes Olearius, claiming that there was no discrepancy between his alchemical and theosophical philosophy on the one hand, and the new Lutheran church and its understanding of Christianity on the other. What he harshly criticized was the contemporary status of the Lutheran church and theology.

Emphasizing the priority of action over verbal confessions, Khunrath speaks against those theologians 'who gossip a lot about faith, but have not one atom of it themselves, otherwise they would evidently show the virtue of faith through their actions. By their way of life and their deeds, however, they deny what they orally confess'.[19] In addition, Khunrath condemns the theological, often polemical, disputes of his day as un-Christian. To avoid these un-Christian arguments and to strengthen faith Khunrath postulates a particular method which is based upon a spiritual natural theology. The central focus of this method is the imitation of Christ whose wisdom is embedded within nature by means of alchemical processes, which means that, as Khunrath puts it, the type and image of the Messiah could be properly found in nature in the form of the philosopher's stone. Thus, Khunrath regards the philosopher's stone as the material universal signature of Christ himself. Looking for this universal signature would be more likely than theological arguments to foster a palpable, sensory knowledge of the Messiah,

[19] Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum*, 10 (versus 10): '*Multi Theologorum (sic dictorum) multa è suggestis historicè blaterant de Fide; qui ne atomo virtutis fidei operosae praesentiam effectu demonstrant. Negant isti (de bonis non loquor) vita & factis, quod ore aiunt*'.

of the truth of the Christian trinity, and, consequently, of the articles of the Christian faith. In Khunrath's words:

> Let it be God's will that even some of those theologians, who nowadays argue with each other in such an un-Christian way, follow in the steps of the ancient patriarchs, kabbalists, magicians, or sages by making the effort to learn, read, touch, see, and recognize the Messiah in the universal Book of Nature as his real image. In doing so (if at the same time they are being led in the light of nature by the hand of the spirit of the divine wisdom), they will more truly recognize and understand the doctrine of God, of Christ the person, and of Christ's office, as well as the articles of the Christian faith, than they will by simply having verbal arguments. For the Book of Nature explains the Book of the Holy Scriptures and vice versa.[20]

The imitation of the so-called ancient magicians necessarily entails following a specific spiritual way of life. As a consequence, the follower of the 'spirit of the divine wisdom', Khunrath says, has to submit himself to the same process as the one that leads the alchemist to the philosopher's stone. Khunrath interprets this process as a purgative one, identifying it with the passion of Christ. Psychologically it works through repentance and expiation, which will display in Christian deeds and piety. Alchemically it works through distillation, separation, and coagulation, which will similarly produce the material 'panacea of life' with its universal healing and transformative power. A guide to both, the mystical ascent to God and the spiritual descent to the *materia prima* of the philosopher's stone, is the divine wisdom and its transformative force, its spirit, upon which alone, as Khunrath claims, the church should be built.

In its universal form this church is a non-confessional, invisible *ecclesia spiritualis*, which Khunrath held to be the fundament of every visible church. Here Khunrath comes very close to Luther's understanding of the church in the *Confessio Augustana*, which was not yet confessional in the sense that the new church should be distinct from other, e.g. the Catholic, churches. Khunrath's reference to the wisdom of God and

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[20] Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum*, 58 (versus 137): '*Vtinam Theologi nonnulli, hodierno die parum Christianè disputantes, in hoc (vetustiores imitantes Patriarchas, Cabalistas, Magos aut Sapientes) operam quoque collocarent suam, vt discerent legere, videre, tangere, cognoscere MASCHIAM typo reali in Libro Naturae Catholico; veracius certè (lumine sic simul ducti Naturae, SPIRITVS SAPIENTIAE manu) quam verbosa disputatione cognoscerent & deprehenderent Doctrinam de Deo, Christi persona, officio, omnibusque Christianae Religionis articulis. Liber enim Naturae explicat librum Sanctae Scripturae: Et contra*'.

the Wisdom Books of the Hebrew Bible displays a further close connection to Protestant theologians of his day. Just as Protestant theologians translated and commented on the Wisdom Books in order to present a practical guideline for living a pious Christian life,[21] so, too, Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum* is conceived as a mystical guide based on 365 sentences taken from the Wisdom Books of the Hebrew Bible. Every day of the year the reader should contemplate one sentence in order to become more familiar with the spirit of the divine wisdom and to experience its transformative power as manifested through the three basic books: the Book of Nature, the Book of the Holy Scripture, and the Book of Man's Conscience.

Yet, Khunrath's work contains many aspects that must have offended dogmatic Lutheran theologians. Among the offensive tenets, one can mention the following: (1) Khunrath defines the secrets of nature as sacraments which were revealed by divine wisdom; (2) Khunrath's "synergetic" position implies that man should be active in approaching the divine grace, but at the same time it maintains that those actions can only be successful with God's support; (3) Khunrath claims that God's son would have incarnated even if mankind had not been sinful, simply as a result of God's love for mankind.

Nevertheless, Khunrath did not consider himself a heretic. Rather, he saw himself as a true Christian who tried to establish a practical Christianity based on experience by introducing the contemplation of nature—the latter understood as alchemically organized by the divine wisdom—into the life of the church. However, for Khunrath the sentence '*non salus extra ecclesiam*' had no value. For him, the only function of the visible church was to serve as a community in which the faith of the weak and sinful individual could be strengthened. Everyone, Khunrath was convinced, should bring his abilities into the ecclesiastical community for the sake of one's fellow human beings.

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[21] Cf. the following examples, all of which are texts written by Lutherans: David Chyträus, *Sententiae Iesu Syracidae / Addita Explicatione Davidis Chytraei*, Wittenberg 1556; Lukas Geyerberg, *Sententiae Iesu Syracidae* […] *Descriptae in Locos communes, in gratiam piae iuventutis, studio M. Lucae Geyerbergij*, Frankfurt/M. 1564; Nikolaus Selnecker, *Salomonis Liber Sapientiae Ad Tyrannos* […] *Argumentis et Annotationibus necessarijs illustratus*, Leipzig 1568; Joachim Camerarius, *Sapientiae Iesu filii Sirachi* […] *cum quorundam locorum notatione*, Leipzig 1568; Johannes Mathesius, *Syrach Mathesii, Das ist, Christliche, lehrhaffte, trostreiche und lustige Erklerung u. Außlegung des schönen Haußbuchs, so der weyse Mann Syrach zusammen gebracht u. geschrieben* […], Leipzig 1588.

4. *The Role of Alchemy and Hermeticism in the Early Phase of Pietism*

As mentioned above, many Paracelsians associated Paracelsus with the mythical figure of Hermes Trismegistus, calling Theophrastus the new German Hermes. But what exactly did they mean by this significant comparison? The two most important traditions related to Mercurius Trismegistus that came together in the late fifteenth century were, without doubt, also known in Paracelsian circles: (1) the alchemical tradition in which Hermes was thought to be the author of the famous bible of the alchemists, the *Tabula Smaragdina Hermetis*; (2) the mystical, cosmological, and magical tradition based on the *Corpus Hermeticum* and on the Latin tract entitled *Asclepius*.

At a first glance, it seems that the Paracelsians saw Paracelsus as a new Hermes primarily in terms of the first tradition, emphasizing his knowledge of the secrets of nature and his reformation of alchemy. The second tradition, however, also played a central role within the Paracelsian movement. In order to support the dissemination of Paracelsus' *Alchemia medica*, Bodenstein and Toxites provided an ideology that was based, in part, on the Hermetic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino. Ficino had translated the *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1463; it was then first printed in Treviso in 1471. His translation, together with the commentary of Faber Stapulensis, was also part of the two Basle editions of Ficino's *Opera omnia* in 1561 and 1576. Thus, calling Paracelsus the new German Hermes not only referred to his alchemical doctrine, but, in the light of Ficino's interpretation of Hermes, also interpreted Theophrastus in a mystical sense. Paracelsus, especially in his books *Labyrinthus medicorum errantium* and *Fundamenta scientiarum et sapientiae*, suggested that the investigation of nature depends on the wisdom of God. In order to reveal the secrets of nature, which had been implanted into the creation by its creator, one not only needed to be hard-working, but also pious. Piety was in fact held to be absolutely necessary, since the investigator of nature had to be inspired from above in order to discover the hidden secrets of nature.[22]

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[22] This specific connection between Hermeticism and Paracelsianism can be seen in a book on magic, edited in Basle in 1575, the *Arbatel de magia veterum*, Aphorism 26: '*Hermes Trismegistus est secretorum pater cum Theophrasto Paracelso, et in se omnes habent vires secretorum*'. See also Aphorism 22: '*Secretum id dicimus, quod industria humana sine revelatione nemo exquisiverit, cuius scientia latet in creatura a Deo occulta* […]'.

In the early stages of German Pietism, Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum* constituted the most influential expression of the combination of Hermeticism and alchemy—or spiritual piety and natural science. Khunrath makes Hermes Trismegistus the representative of the main principle of his pious investigation by referring to the first chapter of Ficino's translation:

> For when your mind, o Son, has been illuminated by the light of the Eternal Wisdom and will then be guided by its ineffable light, you will find your safe path through the darkness of errors: For God himself, as Mercurius Trismegistus teaches us, is the eye of our mind. Without it our mind remains blind in the realm of natural, supernatural, and divine things. Without it we will never see the light of the Holy Scriptures, of Nature, or of self-knowledge.[23]

Therefore, Khunrath argues, the philosopher must be taught directly by 'Pimander, i.e. the mind of the divine power',[24] not only to learn about the secrets of nature, but also to prepare for the spiritual transformation from the old Adam into the new one. Thus, every Christian, and especially every Christian scientist, has to go through a process of inner renewal in order to give birth to the "Christ within us", following the death of the old "Adam within us". This purgative process within man is reflected by the processes observable in nature. Just as the alchemist purges matter by means of fire in order to prepare the philosopher's stone, so the inner seed of the "Christ within us" must be prepared by making the eye of man's mind (*oculus mentis*) transparent for the divine influence which by the warmth of its light causes the inner seed to grow. Regarding the dialectic between the investigation of nature, the necessary spiritual disposition of the investigator, and the mystical inner transformation of man, it must be said that, in Khunrath's writings, Hermes stands for the wisdom of the old sages representing exactly that dialectic prevailing before the appearance of Christ.

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[23] Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum*, 99 (versus 205): '*Quod si animus tuus, o fili, SAPIENTIÆ Æternae radio, sic Cabalicè fuerit illuminatus; (est enim, secundum Mercurium Trismegistum, DEVS IPSE nostrae oculus Mentis, sine cuius lumine (dico) manet coeca tam in Physicis quam hyperphysicis atque Divinis; nec vnquam videbimus sive SS^a^ Scripturae, sive Naturae Nostrique ipsius cognitionis lumen (tunc huius tam ineffabilis luminis ductu, per omnes errorum tenebras secure ambulabis* [...]'.

[24] Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum*, 154 (versus 299): '*A Pimandro, h. e. Mente Divinae potentiae* [...]'. Khunrath quotes Ficino, *Pimander*, a 5 r. Other references to Ficino's Hermes can be found in v. 170, v. 261, v. 317. For references to the *Tabula Smaragdina* see v. 5, v. 136.

Thus, referring to Paracelsus as the new German Hermes, the Paracelsians believe that Paracelsus reveals the dynamics between natural science and mystical piety *after* the appearance of Christ just as the Egyptian Hermes once revealed it *before* the appearance of Christ. As a consequence, in the opinion of the Paracelsians the old Hermes of the pagans is replaced by the new Christian Hermes Paracelsus. The historical moment of this replacement was interpreted by most Paracelsians as the hour of birth of a new Christian science provided by the Creator himself.

Provided that the celebrated Lutheran author of edifying literature, Johann Arndt, can still be seen as the father of Pietism, Arndt's thought should be taken as instrumental, though not the sole influence, in instilling the Paracelsian alchemo-Hermetic philosophy into the approach to nature found within Pietism.[25]

Johann Arndt's early writings provide reflections on Paracelsian medicine, on Khunrath's alchemical theosophy, and also on Hermes.[26] In his *Oratio de antiqua philosophia: et divina veterum Magorum sapientia recuperanda, deque Vanitate Scientiarum et artium huius Seculi Oratio* from 1597, Arndt combined the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible with Hermetic wisdom. Due to Hermes' threefold status as an ancient Egyptian priest, philosopher, and king, Arndt subdivided the knowledge of Hermes into three parts: theology, natural philosophy, and politics/history. Moreover, Arndt described the source of Hermes' knowledge as the same source used by King Solomon, namely, inspiration from divine wisdom. Because of this, Arndt explains, Hermes was capable of prophesying the coming of Christ, of investigating the secrets of nature, and of recognizing the laws of civil justice and of history.[27] Thus, Arndt interpreted the threefold wisdom of Hermes as the coherence of natural science, history, and salvation, exactly as the Paracelsians did.

In his early work *Ikonographia*, as well as in the fourth book of his main work, the *Four Books on True Christianity*, Johann Arndt clearly refers to the Paracelsian doctrine of the signature of things. Through the

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[25] See Geyer, *Verborgene Weisheit*; Neumann, *Natura sagax*; Schneider, 'Johann Arndt als Lutheraner?'; Schneider, 'Arndt als Paracelsist'; Brecht, 'Das Aufkommen der neuen Frömmigkeitsbewegung in Deutschland'.

[26] Arndt attributed an Encomion, a prayer with the significant title *Oratio Theosophica ad Fontem Sapientiae Christum Opt*[imum] *Maximum. Christiani Cordati* to the 1609 edition of Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum*.

[27] Arndt, *De antiqua philosophia*, fol. 7.

signature of things, as Arndt contends, God reveals to man his great pharmacy (*Apotheke Gottes*), implanted by the Creator into nature while creating the world, which must be uncovered by means of alchemical proceedings ('the art of separation'—'*die Kunst der Scheidung*').[28] As for the spiritual transformation of man, Arndt, relying heavily upon Khunrath, compares nature to a mirror that reveals from the beginning everything that man should aim at spiritually:

> In nature the heavenly light gradually reveals itself out of the earthly darkness, throws it [i.e. the earthly darkness] away by means of natural separation, and with its wonderful radiance, pleases its concealed friends. O please let what I see in nature happen in me spiritually! Let your spirit awaken in me the gift of God, which lives in all faithful men. Let your spirit separate from me the impure, let it renew me by killing my sinful flesh for the sake of a better life. Let it unify me with You. Finally, let it gloriously transfigure me through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your son.[29]

Thus, we find the same relation between natural philosophy and spirituality in the works of Arndt as in the works of Khunrath. Arndt

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[28] Arndt, *Wahres Christenthum*, 701–702: 'Da hat Gott zugerüstet eine große Apotheke, und ein großes Kräuterbuch ganz wunderlich und vollkömmlich geschrieben. Das ist ein lebendiges Buch, nicht wie man die Kräuter in Büchern beschreibet, und als einen toten Schatten abmalet; sondern in Gottes Buch sind lebendige Buchstaben, welche allen Menschen, großen und kleinen, gelehrten und ungelehrten vor Augen gestellet werden; allein, daß sie nicht von jedermann recht gelesen werden können, darum, daß sie die schöne, herrliche Signatur und Zeichnung der Kräuter nicht kennen. Dieselbe muß man zuvor wissen, so kann man diese herrlichen, schönen, lebendigen Buchstaben lesen und zusammensetzen. Bedenke allhier die Weisheit und Gütigkeit Gottes. Du wirst an jedem Kraut und Blümlein sonderliche Zeichen finden, welche sind die lebendige Handschrift und Überschrift Gottes, damit Er jedes Kraut gezeichnet nach seiner verborgenen Kraft, so künstlich, wunderlich, so zierlich, daß sie kein Künstler wird so eigentlich nachmalen können. Ja mit der äußerlichen Form und Proportion zeigen sie oft an ihre verborgene Kraft. […] Wo du nun nicht allein die äußerliche Form und Signatur erkennest, sondern die innerliche, verborgene Form, und dieselbe offenbar machest durch die Kunst der Scheidung, daß du herausziehest die Kraft, in welcher die rechte Arzenei liegt, die pur lautere Essenz und helles Licht aus ihren Schalenhäuslein und Kästlein, darein sie Gott der herr gelegt hat, so wirst du erst die Güte des Schöpfers schmecken in seinem Werk […]'.

[29] Johann Arndt, *Wahres Christenthum*, 692: 'In der Natur wickelt sich nach und nach das himmlische Licht aus der irdischen Finsternis hervor, wirft dieselbe durch eine natürliche Scheidung von sich und erfreuet mit seinem wunderbaren Glanz Deine verborgenen Freunde. Ach, laß das, was ich in der Natur sehe, in mir geistlich geschehen! Laß Deinen Geist in mir erwecken die Gabe Gottes, die in allen Gläubigen ist, laß ihn die Unreine von mir scheiden, mich durch Abtötung meines sündlichen Fleisches zu einem bessern Leben erneuern, mit Dir vereinigen, und endlich herrlich verklären, durch Jesum Christum Deinen Sohn, unsern Herrn. Amen'.

draws on the Hermetic and alchemical tradition in order to create a very pragmatic interpretation of the practical aspects of Christianity. Investigating nature and meditating on it with a pious mind become part of his intended reform of the Lutheran church from within.

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BETWEEN THEOSOPHY AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY: JOHANN SALOMO SEMLER'S HERMETIC RELIGION

Peter Hanns Reill

Johann Salomo Semler was one of Germany's most renowned eighteenth-century theologians. As senior professor of theology at the University of Halle—the largest theological training ground in Protestant Germany—Semler was considered by many of his contemporaries to be the leading spokesman for a new form of Enlightenment theology that stressed the primacy of individual conscience, argued for the necessity of advancing religious toleration, and proclaimed a "progressive" hermeneutical analysis of religion founded upon historical and philological analysis. Though today relegated to the rank of a "secondary" figure, Semler in his own lifetime was often compared favorably to Lessing and Mendelssohn, believed to have a theological imagination equal to theirs, but endowed, at least compared to Lessing, with a far greater command of history, philology, and hermeneutics. Like them, he was attacked by the same critics, including Pastor Goeze of Hamburg, Lessing's arch theological enemy, and by Lavater, Mendelssohn's nemesis. Semler was even cited in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as representing the newest trend in theological thought, although he is depicted in a very negative light.[1] For many German Enlightenment thinkers, Semler

[1] Goethe's negative characterization in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*) reveals the threat that neology posed to more traditional thinkers. In one scene of the work, Werther returns to Lotte's village to discover that the new pastor's wife had had the enormous walnut trees of the old pastor's residence cut down. Playing with symbols of destruction (the tree as symbol of life) and emasculation, the pastor's wife is portrayed as incapable of appreciating life and the healthy aspects of tradition. He characterizes her as: 'Eine Närrin, die sich abgibt, gelehrt zu sein, sich in die Untersuchung des Kanons meliert, gar viel an der neumodischen, moralisch-kritischen Reformation des Christentumes ableitet'. The main culprits behind this reform movement were, Goethe proclaimed, 'Kennicott, Semler, and Michaelis' (Goethe, *Leiden des Jungen Werthers*, 81). This passage not only indicates Goethe's wariness concerning neology, but also the fact that he was not aware of Semler's interest in Hermeticism. This is interesting since recent interpretations following Rolf Christian Zimmermann's path-breaking study of the young Goethe often link Semler and Goethe, along with Georg Foster and Lessing as people greatly fascinated by Hermeticism. For this linkage see Zimmermann's introduction to the second edition of Will-Erich Peukert, *Das Rosenkreutz*, xiii–xiv.

served as a theological herald for a non-dogmatic, humanistic, and progressive Protestantism, often referred to as *neology*.

Neology, according to Karl Aner, its most prominent twentieth-century historian, formed the second phase of the Enlightenment critique of orthodox religion, following the Wolffian moment which sought to draw a parallel between reason and revelation, and preceding the rationalist phase which equated reason with revelation. In Aner's view, neology eliminated all of the non-rational elements of revelation, which included most of its historical content, without denying the concept of revelation outright.[2] The neologists were able to achieve this feat by "historicizing" the biblical message, interpreting the meaning of Holy Scripture by reference to local customs, geography, mentalities, and social and political structures. In support of this position, they also argued that the Bible was a form of sacred poetry, guided not by the rules of discursive logic but rather by the predominance of metaphor and poetic expression. Hence, they denied the literal interpretation of Holy Scripture. For a majority of Semler's contemporaries, the neological endeavor represented a daring attempt to redefine religion.

Until recently, Semler has been viewed as a neologist *par excellence*, and hence as an arch-enemy of any type of Hermetic and theosophical thinking, the ultimate pragmatic rationalist in an overly rationalistic era. True, in his later years, Semler did publish a number of works proclaiming that he had been able to generate, what he called '*Luft-Gold*' through the processes of 'higher chemistry',[3] but these claims were usually dismissed as irrelevant to Semler's core Enlightenment theological project by employing one of two explanatory strategies. The first assumed that the elder Semler could not cope with the manner in which things were changing in the late Enlightenment. Hence, he left the ranks of the Enlightenment and joined the conservative religious reaction led by Wöllner, the Rosicrucian author of the infamous Prussian decree that sought to control public religious expression. According to this interpretation there were two Semlers: a progressive one and one who, in his later life, was 'totally sunk in alchemical daydreams',[4] and

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[2] Aner, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit*, 3–4.

[3] Semler, *Von ächter hermetische Arznei. An Herrn Leopold Baron Hirschen*; Semler, *Ueber ächter hermetische Arznei, zweites Stuck*; Semler, *Von ächter hermetischer Arznei. Antwort auf Herrn Hofrath Karstens Abhandlung*.

[4] Dilthey, 'Leben Schleiermachers', 40. All translations are mine if not noted otherwise.

conservative politics. The second interpretative strategy simply minimizes the importance of Semler's Hermeticism for the development of his views on religion and theology. In fact, it projects upon the Enlightenment present-day convictions that serious theological thinkers are capable of separating their "natural scientific" concerns from their theological ones. In this vein, Gottfried Hornig, the foremost interpreter of Semler's theology today, contends that 'Semler's failed experiments to generate gold were indeed serious activities and accorded with his natural scientific inclinations. However, they remained a sideline activity and were not able to interfere with the continual and intensive work on exegetical, church historical and dogmatic themes'.[5]

In an earlier paper, I have argued that this was far from the case, namely that Semler's embarrassing search for a way of generating gold from air was in fact central to his theological vision.[6] In this paper, I would like to expand upon this position by arguing that Semler sought to construct a new form of theological Hermeticism based upon Enlightenment principles that took a critical stance towards traditional Hermetic thought, while striving to renew and modernize what he considered to be Hermeticism's essence. In this sense, Semler propounded a uniquely Enlightenment form of Hermeticism that separated it from the types of esotericism propounded by his contemporaries such as Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, Swedenborg, Lavater, Saint-Germain, Mesmer, and the Rosicrucian followers of Baron von Hund.

Thus, Semler's position illustrates the complexity of the polemical debate about esotericism that raged during the Enlightenment. That debate was not simply between Hermeticism and Enlightenment. Rather it revolved around the issue of how Hermeticism should be interpreted and used. There is no doubt that the term *Hermeticism*, along with others such as *alchemy* and *magic* could be used by some Enlightenment thinkers as well as by orthodox theologians to discredit their enemies in the polemics of the period. There were also many enlightened thinkers, however, who were nevertheless beguiled by various Hermetic ideas and sought to incorporate these Hermetic assumptions in their thought, while leaving aside those they considered old fashioned, unfounded or opposed to nature. These 'enlightened Hermeticists' attacked old-fashioned Hermeticists or Rosicrucians with as much vigor

[5] Hornig, *Johann Salomo Semler*, 82.
[6] Reill, 'Religion, Theology, and the Hermetic Imagination'.

and vitriol as they did adherents of mechanistic natural philosophy and orthodox theology. And that attack was returned with as much if not more vehemence. At stake in all of these polemical exchanges was the issue of defining 'true Enlightenment', of answering the question *Was ist Aufklärung*? Thus the polemical lines overlapped in ways that modern interpreters, blinded by stereotypical assumptions concerning Enlightenment and Hermeticism, fail to appreciate. Semler forms but one chapter in the story of this larger debate, advancing a polemical war on three fronts, against old-fashioned orthodoxy, against mechanistic natural philosophers, who thought matter inert, and against "false", "old-fashioned", and dangerous Hermeticists and Rosicrucians.[7] Only when we understand these lines of attack, the points of agreement reached and then breeched and the shifting alliances between various positions, can we better understand the dynamics and nuances of Enlightenment thought. In this essay, I will concentrate upon Semler's innovative reinterpretation of Hermeticism and how it led him to wage polemical war against other Hermetic thinkers of the period.

What guided Semler in his endeavor to reform and modernize Hermeticism? Semler's whole approach was dictated by the belief that the world was suffused with life and spirit. As Aristotle before him, Semler proclaimed that 'everything is filled with life and soul. This general principle encompasses everything that one can discover about individual living creations; everything is full of living substance, including even the most unusual creatures that have been elevated to life'.[8] In accepting this view, Semler propounded a theory of matter that had become increasingly popular during the high and late Enlightenment, a position that also corresponds to one of Antoine Faivre's basic components of esotericism.[9] During this period a host of Enlightenment

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[7] Semler's disagreements with orthodoxy have been discussed by writers such as Hornig, who concentrate upon Semler's exegetical writings. Semler's opposition to mechanistic Enlightenment thinkers reached its high point in his disputes with the radical reformer and theologian Karl Friedrich Bahrdt. Semler's critique of 'magic' and 'demonology' has been discussed primarily by those who consider Semler to be a major neologist. Erik Midelfort provides an excellent example of this approach in his *Exorcism and Enlightenment*, 88–94. There has, however, been very little discussion of Semler as a critic of Hermeticism from within.

[8] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 28.

[9] In his attempt to define the components of esoteric thought, Faivre lists four essential characteristics and two secondary ones. The four essential ones are: (1) correspondences; (2) living nature; (3) imagination and mediations; (4) experience of transmutation. The two secondary ones are: (1) the praxis of concordance; (2) trans-

thinkers, dissatisfied with the radical Cartesian distinction between mind and matter, had sought to re-vitalize nature by introducing concepts of active force into matter itself. The stark separation of form and spirit was dissolved in favor of an idea in which matter was seen as being imbued with active spirit. What was unique about this revaluation of Enlightenment matter theory is that the Enlightenment vitalists refused to posit a strict identity between matter and spirit.[10] Instead, they sought a middle road between mechanical reductionism and animist identity. Vitalists argued that the active life forces could not be seen directly, nor could they be measured. They were "occult powers" in the traditional sense of the term. At best they were announced by outward signs, whose meaning could only be grasped indirectly. In this language of nature the topos of locating "real reality" as something that lurked within a body played a crucial role. That which was immediately observable was considered superficial. Understanding entailed a progressive descent into the depths of observed reality, using signs as markers to chart the way. Thus, Enlightenment vitalists reintroduced the idea of semiotics as one of the methods to decipher the secrets of nature. In making this choice they opted for an epistemological stance that denied the possibility of ever reaching ultimate truths about matter or morals, preferring instead a form of thought that I have elsewhere defined as epistemological modesty.[11]

Semler adopted this position and applied it to his conception of the relation between God, humanity, and nature. In this sense, Semler associated himself with what he considered the theosophical imperative, that is, to study nature's effects without abandoning the need to understand the hidden, spiritual message implanted by God in nature and also in revelation. For Semler, true theosophy strove to study 'the

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mission. The component of living nature corresponds to Semler's assertion, namely that the cosmos is complex and plural, in which 'Nature occupies an essential place'. In Faivre's view this leads to 'a science of Nature, a gnosis laden with soteriological elements, a theosophy which labors over the triad of "God-Humanity-Nature" from whence the theosopher brings forth dramaturgical correspondences, complementary and forever new' (Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 11).

[10] I have dealt with these issues in my book, *Vitalizing Nature*. For additional work on this general movement see Roger, *Les sciences de la vie dans la pensée francaise du XVIIIe siècle*; Jordanova, *Languages of Nature*; Kapitza, *Die frühromantische Theorie der Mischung*; Larson, *Interpreting Nature*; Moravia, *Beobachtende Vernunft*; Rey, *Naissance et développement du vitalisme en France*; Sloan, 'The Gaze of Natural History'; Spary, *Utopia's Garden*; John Zammito, *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology*.

[11] Reill, *Vitalizing Nature*.

infinite book of God in nature', avoiding thereby a merely 'naturalistic Enlightenment [*naturalistische Aufklärung*] which denies, all at once, its connections with the Bible'.[12] In short, he sought to probe the interconnections between 'the book of nature and Christian revelation'.[13] Central to this project was Semler's belief that nature, God and humanity were part of an interconnected whole, linked together in analogical lines of development. Though not a pantheist in the strict sense of the term, Semler, like Herder did at times seem to approach this position. What differentiated both from a strict Spinozist position was their belief that God did act in the world in a decisive manner, creating the conditions that made the production of new forms possible and necessary. What God has ordained in the spiritual world, He has also ordained in the natural. Since the two spheres are linked, they go through similar "revolutions" or transformations. Thus, 'according to God's wisest plans, there arise similar great revolutions in the moral world as in the physical'.[14] According to Semler, 'It is and remains God's holiest and wisest order, that he rules and develops the moral human world not any less than the physical'.[15] He reiterated these points in his autobiography. 'I do not have the least doubt in a revelation and lesson from God, whereby the moral world has similar periods as the physical world has great revolutions'.[16] Therefore, according to Semler, 'the developments in the moral world have, following God's plan, their periods and steps just as the knowledge and discovery of the physical'.[17] This correspondence between developments in the natural and moral world—another component of Faivre's characterization of esoteric knowledge—and the methods by which knowledge is achieved in both, served as the epistemological foundation for the development of Semler's theology, assuring its veracity and providing the ultimate proof for his propositions. For this reason it is necessary to examine the Hermetic ideal that informed Semler's thought.

As I mentioned earlier, Semler had adopted the epistemological modesty of the Enlightenment, according to which it is impossible for any living person to acquire absolute knowledge of nature, humanity,

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[12] Semler, *Unparteiische Samlungen*, vol. 1, 8.
[13] Semler, *Unparteiische Samlungen*, vol. 4, 'Vorrede'.
[14] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 33.
[15] Semler, *Neue Versuch*, 93.
[16] Semler, *Lebensbeschreibung*, vol. II, Vorrede.
[17] Semler, *Lebensbeschreibung*, vol. II, 158.

or God. There 'is no such immutable knowledge [*Erkenntniß*], which for 3 to 4 thousand years has had the same contents'.[18] This was equally true about knowledge of nature and of the moral or spiritual world. 'Human beings have no claim to know everything all at once; neither nature nor art is once and for all completed, or exhausted'.[19] Behind Semler's position lay the Pietistic and theosophical critiques of orthodoxy exemplified by the figures of Gottfried Arnold, Joanna Lead, Johann Georg Gichtel, and Richard Simon, the tradition of late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century skepticism, the renewed interest in historical studies, which Semler imbibed as a young scholar working with Sigmund Baumgarten, and, what I believe to be the most important influence of all, the general historization of nature and humanity that accompanied the turn from mechanism to Enlightenment vitalism beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century and increasing in intensity in the late Enlightenment. Semler creatively combined all of these themes in order to carve out a distinct Hermetic-theosophical space that differentiated him from earlier Hermetic and esoteric thinkers and also from contemporaries who were seeking to resurrect these earlier modes of thought.

The central focus of Semler's intellectual, moral, and religious concerns has to do with the question of creation or generation, an issue basic to both Hermeticism or esotericism and to the development of Enlightenment vitalism. A major part of the esotericist corpus of knowledge had been built upon the symbols, myths, and metaphors of generation. These had been clothed in languages derived from Platonic, Neoplatonic, magical, and kabbalistic sources, and were authorized by relating these concepts to a distant past, usually located in "Egyptian" and/or Mosaic precedents. Throughout the early modern period, images of male-female differentiation, the marriage of opposites, and of the generation and growth of metals in the bowels of the earth formed an essential part of the Hermetic-alchemical-theosophical discourse. As Mircea Eliade remarked, alchemy and Hermeticism projected 'the idea of life [...] on to the cosmos', thereby 'sexualizing it. It is not a matter of making objective or scientific observations but of arriving at an appraisal of the world around us in terms of life, and in terms of anthropocosmic destiny, embracing sexuality, fecundity, death and

[18] Semler, *Zusätze zu der teutschen Uebersetzung*, 99.
[19] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 13–14.

rebirth'.[20] The rise of mechanistic world views in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century called all of these connections into question, relegating most of them to the realm of fantasy, superstition, magic, and nonsense. For mechanists, generation was best explained not by interactions between male and female powers or fluids, but by the theory of "divine preformation", which postulated that all things had been created at the beginning of time and just appeared when their appointed hour tolled.

In many ways then, mechanism and early modern Hermeticism or esotericism stood in stark contrast with one another. Mechanists believed matter to be dead, life explicable by reference to matter in motion, and knowledge to be attained by a detailed investigation of relationships of cause and effect. Hermeticists assumed matter to be animated, life explicable through micro-macrocosmic correspondences, and knowledge best obtained through analogical reasoning. Yet despite these differences, both assumed that true knowledge of nature and humanity (and sometimes of God) was attainable, in fact had been known by humans who had lived at the beginning of time, however that time might be defined. In this they agreed with orthodox Christians, who believed that the primitive church was the foundation upon which all positive theological knowledge rested. All established a normative moment in which transparent knowledge existed, had then disintegrated, though sometimes preserved by a small group of adepts, but still could be recovered, though by many different paths and methods. The desire to retrieve this pure and distant knowledge animated all of these typical early modern pursuits—orthodox Christianity, Hermeticism, esotericism, and mechanistic deism.

Semler's attempt to institute a new Hermetic theosophy went against the grain of all of these assumptions: he incorporated contemporary discussions concerning generation into his ideas of nature, God, and humanity, which reinforced his tendency to historicize nature and humanity and ground them in God's action, will, and logos. This led him to proclaim a "progressive" Hermetic theosophy, looking towards creation in the future rather than to a re-creation of the past. Rather than recover something lost, he called for the expansion of our ability to understand nature's hidden forces and hence to improve our own moral condition. In my opinion, Semler's take upon creation and its

[20] Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 34.

relation to the central theosophical issue of God-humanity-nature defines the unique element of his religious thought. This complex of ideas runs like a red thread through all of his major works, whether on the history of religion, on Rosicrucianism, on natural history, or on the possibility of generating gold from air. In this analysis, I will concentrate upon two of his texts not usually drawn into the discussion of his religious thought, one written in response to Charles Bonnet's theory of preformation, the *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie* (1783), the other, his four volume history of Rosicrucianism, his *Unparteische Samlungen zur Historie der Rosenkreuzer* (1786–1788).

In the *Nachlese*, Semler launched a full-scale attack upon Bonnet's idea that God had preformed all living creatures at the beginning of time and encased them in the womb (the notorious idea of *emboîtement*) and that generation could occur without copulation.[21] Semler, like many of the Enlightenment vitalists, returned to the Aristotelian principle that copulation, which was the effect of 'one living creature' acting 'upon another', constituted the general law explaining all creation.[22] For Semler, Bonnet's idea that creation could occur without copulation—an idea that Bonnet himself described as a great achievement—only produced great confusion.[23]

Why did Semler find Bonnet's neo-Leibnizian ideas so distasteful?[24] The first and simplest answer was that they reeked of determinism, hence denying free will. Second and closely related to the first, they minimized the crucial importance of time and place in forming specific creations. Third, they assumed that nature and humanity did not actively interact, but simply followed parallel paths, charted out at the beginning of time. All of these ideas stood in stark contrast to the theosophical-Hermetic tradition upon which Semler played and which he sought to modernize, subscribing as he did to the theosophical visions of a living nature, of creative generation, of actual mediations between

[21] In preformation, copulation was interpreted as an inciting moment that awakened the already created and encased "germs" or seeds. It was not necessary and therefore other actions could achieve the same function.

[22] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 37–40.

[23] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 44.

[24] One of the fascinating aspects of Semler's attempt to reformulate Hermetic and historical thought was that he, as most of the Enlightened vitalists, rejected abstract theory, was critical of Neoplatonism, and turned to "empirical" studies, seeking to revive Aristotle and, for the Enlightenment vitalists, Hippocrates. I make this point in *Vitalizing Nature*.

active parties, of transmutations, and of the centrality of free will in shaping and improving religious, moral, and natural discourse.

According to Semler, generation constituted the ultimate mystery of the world, the proof of God's greatness, His majesty, and also His wisdom, for through generation, God had instituted a system that accomplished the greatest results (the enormous proliferation of manifold nature) using the simplest means. For this reason, Semler took his stand on the side of the Enlightenment proponents of epigenesis, who offered a vision of change based upon real interaction between mating couples. They explained change using the concept of goal, making it the efficient cause of development. An explanation for the existence of any given entity took the form of a narrative, modeled upon the concept of stage-like development or epigenesis, in which its body evolved through a series of steps from a point of creation. This "genesis"[25] was driven forward by an active force, energy, or spirit inhabiting matter. Unique creation and true qualitative transformation formed part of the vitalists' vision of living nature.[26]

Semler not only accepted epigenesis as the best explanation for animal creation, but also universalized the concept, using it as an explanatory model to encompass all creation, including animal, mineral, and moral generation and development. In Semler's enlightened Hermetic theosophy, interaction, continual generation, and stage-like development, all driven on by goal (not form), led to the creation of an amazing diversity of entities within the universal laws of generation instituted by God. Ever new creations, both in the moral and natural realm, were produced, each expressing their own individuality, yet also reflecting and participating in the progressive goals established by God. These considerations led Semler to develop his own theory of generation, one which applied as much to the generation of insects as to that of religion and morals, and which is even reflected in the way in which he believed one could generate gold from air.

In Semler's theory the universe was filled with prime matter (*prima materia*), undifferentiated but ever ready to be organized by a force capable of separating elements from primary matter, an act he called

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[25] I wish to avoid using the term 'development', since 'development' in the eighteenth century referred to the simple expansion of a preformed body.

[26] Kant was much more influenced by this explanatory model than is usually supposed. For an excellent discussion of the vitalistic influences on his philosophy see: Krohn & Küppers, 'Die natürlichen Ursachen der Zwecke'.

the separation from the mother-animal (*Mutterthier*).[27] This force—which he sometimes called the power of distillation, sometimes the life force—led to the creation of what Semler termed the *actu primo*, an invisible, creative moment, still undeveloped (in the eighteenth-century term of the word—without form), and without a place (*Ort*), but ready to become visible under conditions dependent upon time and place. The *actu primo* were the 'germs' or *Keime* that under correct conditions would precipitate out into secondary perceptible forms. Thus, according to Semler, two moments succeeded one another in the history of generation. The first: the generation of the invisible, formless *actu primo*, which expresses the idea of epigenesis—new creation based upon the analogy of copulation. The second: the actual appearance of an individual entity, the *actu secundo*, which is dependent upon time (*Zeit*) and place (*Ort*), i.e. upon the historical circumstances in which the *actu primo* became manifested. This growth of a pre-formed entity corresponded to the eighteenth-century concept of 'development' or '*Entwickelung*'.[28] In short, according to Semler, although all generation is based upon universal principles, and relates back to the creation of an *actu primo*, every physical and individual manifestation of this *actu primo*, in its secondary appearance (*actu secundo*), can be comprehended only by its 'local' nature, by its *Lokalität*.

According to Semler, no individual entity, whether it is an insect, a plant or a human, can escape the moment of its physical manifestation. The interplay between active principle and forming and already formed entities is what drives the world of matter and spirit forward. Every creature or belief is formed at a different time and place, which explains the enormous proliferation of individuals. 'As soon as a thing achieves its reality as externally perceptible (in its own time and place), then we say, it was formed or generated'.[29] Time and place are essential categories for Semler. Everything appears in its "own" place and time, different from its mother, yet carrying on the mother's general characteristics. Each formed entity therefore demonstrates both a generic pattern that is part of its heritage and also its own unique take on this pattern, because of the time and place in which it appeared. In opposition to Bonnet, who claimed that nature worked according to general models

[27] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 41–42.
[28] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 69–70.
[29] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 68.

implanted by God at the moment of creation, Semler countered that the infinite goals to which creatures in the universe are destined make it impossible to reduce natural creations to "models". 'The different gradations and also the connection of all creations contain the reason for their different constructions'.[30]

Nowhere is the historization of nature and spirit more clearly formulated than in this discussion. 'Nature operates on the formation of so many living creatures according to the differences in time and place, in which every creature is connected to all others [...]. Here then one sees how all gradations, from the least developed animal to the most complete, are filled, according to the law of economy'.[31] The law of economy was God's law, which, according to Semler, allowed the greatest diversity with the least amount of activity. This explanation also points to the limitations of a given formation, be it material or spiritual. A theological belief, for example, is simply the specific expression of an inner religious drive, established as *actu primo*, and given distinct form by the time and place of its appearance. As such it cannot encompass the totality of belief implied in the original genesis.[32] Similarly, perceptible metals are precipitations of an *actu primo* that have acquired form in a specific time and place. Once formed, no change can be effected on them—they cannot be transmuted—no matter how skilled the so-called *Laboranten* were in using their alchemical instruments. Thus, Semler distinguished between an inner and outer reality, in which the inner was continually bringing forth new creations in a never ending epigenesis, in which a substance is separated from the primary substance and given form according to the time and place of its appearance.[33] 'God had', Semler proclaimed, 'completed, made full the universe in such a way [...] that he had instituted a continual genesis of things. For in this way, *esse*, "being" [*Daseyn*] would be optimally achieved, for if a perpetual genesis proceeds from itself, so this best accords with a continually existing substance'.[34] For this reason, Semler argued, the

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[30] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 65.

[31] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 65–66.

[32] 'Die *christliche* Sprache, die *Kirchensprache*, ist eben so wenig exklusiv das einzige Mittel, *moralische* Besserung und Wolfart der so sehr ungleichen Menschen auf den ganzen Erdboden, in den und jenen Stufen bekant und wirksam zu machen: als wenig die *teutsche*, oder *lateinische* Sprache einer jeden *einzelnen Zeitperiode dies Mittel ist*' (Semler, *Briefe an einen Freund*, 112).

[33] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 84–85.

[34] Semler, *Nachlese zur Bonnetischen Insektologie*, 78.

universe was governed both by the rules of epigenesis (new creation) and development (*Entwickelung*)—the steady increase of an already created thing. In the same sense, the whole analogy of nature, upon which all knowledge was based, demonstrated nature's creative powers, which, for Semler, validated what he believed to be the central message of theosophy, namely that all absolute and universal formulations ranging from matter to morals were really explicable in terms of the time and place in which they were formed. Hence, Semler argued that no universal sets of 'truths' or 'doctrines' could ever encompass God's majesty. No dogmatic belief can be seen as final, 'because all externals are limited by time and place and are specific to individuals, who are throughout different from one another and will remain so, and therefore with respect to the true and pure religion can only take their individual, local portion'.[35] Generation, in the broad sense of the word, made it impossible for him to accept a world ruled by one party or sect. Because of the infinite manifestations of generation, it became imperative for Semler to allow the greatest degree of religious and intellectual freedom in order to further unimpeded intellectual inquiry, as long as this liberty did not destroy the social ties that allowed people to exercise this very freedom.

Semler's celebration of the time-bound and local nature of human knowledge was not a form of secularization. His whole approach was transfused with a deeply felt religiosity drawn from his attachment to theosophy, defined in its broadest terms as the free, private pursuit of God's wisdom manifested in human morals and nature. In his formal religious works, Semler drew the distinction between fixed dogmatic and theological forms on the one hand and expanding spirit on the other. The former he understood as the external realm of the accidental, closely tied to specific social constellations, the latter was composed of self-thinking, free seekers of religion, who desire to achieve a moral awareness of God's spirit 'through a specifically free application of their spiritual powers [*Seelenkräfte*] as private religion, private morals and private natural philosophy [*Privatphysik*]'.[36] Theosophy in both its historical and its larger sense, served as Semler's model for the improvement of religion. 'Theosophy, mysticism, *spiritualis intelligentia*, was from the very beginning the private religion of every self-thinking,

[35] Semler, *Briefe an einen Freund*, 140.
[36] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 1, 8–9.

free Christian'.[37] Throughout the centuries, these private religions had accomplished great things. Semler claimed that their work had led to the Reformation, which 'broke the yoke of the so-old, so-inhumane hierarchy of the depraved church'.[38] Even more importantly, theosophers had 'courageously affirmed the real freedom of the Christian religion and combined it with all of their theories about nature's infinity [...]; they advanced for all their thinking contemporaries a totally different and free exegesis of the Bible and opened anew the path to individual knowledge of God, of Christ, and of the infinite content of the Christian religion'.[39]

For many late Enlightenment thinkers, Semler's paean to free thought and open biblical exegesis, combined with his attack on dogma and arbitrarily established hierarchies, put him clearly within the ranks of the progressive Enlightenment; even his praise of Boehme and other theosophers would have been excused by Enlightened thinkers skeptical of "enthusiasm", given the manner in which Semler interpreted them, namely as leaders in the fight against intolerant orthodoxy. However, in all of his discussions of theosophy, Semler tied theosophy directly to his vision of nature and its activity, and it was this move that caused many Enlightenment thinkers to consider him an apostate. Semler drew a direct linkage between theosophy—its goals, methods, and procedures—and private, Hermetic, or "higher" chemistry, seeing in both analogous tendencies. Both were according to Semler based on the manner in which nature, as instituted by God's will, power, and knowledge, operated. They both attested to the same truths. To understand the inner workings of religion correctly, one must comprehend the inner workings of nature and *vice versa*. The two were of the same cloth, for 'the whole of theosophy' expressed 'the true principles of this rare Hermetic art [*hermetischen Kunst*]'.[40] In fact, it was theosophy's achievement 'to seize the great, infinite book of nature and search everywhere in it for God, who in it can almost be grasped by the hands, as Paul wrote to the Athenians'.[41] The ultimate test of this "higher," Hermetic art resided in the production of gold accompanied or made possible by the production of a 'universal solvent'. Thus Semler would exclaim:

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[37] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 1, 8.
[38] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 1, 10.
[39] Semler, *Briefe an einen Freund*, 42.
[40] Semler, *Briefe an einen Freund*, 125.
[41] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 1, 25.

> I know that there is an honest, secret chemistry for generating gold [...] just as I recognize the great claims of theosophy; I know that both are connected with God's infinity, with that eternal, magnificent, but still unknown realm of light [*Lichtwelt*] of the ancients, and recognized by all of our contemporaries, who have chosen this secret, free path to access God.[42]

What then constituted this private chemistry? On the simplest level it corresponded to private religion, for it delved into 'the infinite book of God in nature'.[43] Second, 'private chemistry', as an analogical expression of private religion, probed the natural laws instituted by God for the realization of inner spirit or formative force. Third, it considered the mineral kingdom to be as generative, if not more so, than the animal or vegetable. In it life was concentrated, providing a more stable ground upon which to operate than the fleeting world of vegetable matter. Given these presuppositions, private chemistry based its explanations upon genesis, the only method by which Semler thought it possible to produce gold. True secret chemistry was founded upon fermentation and growth, not upon the 'mechanical' operations of what he called 'fire chemistry'. In this sense, secret chemistry was 'natural', fire chemistry artificial. This led him to distinguish between the objects of inquiry of these two forms of chemistry, and the manner in which they proceeded. Fire chemistry investigated ordinary metals, which were already fully formed. Secret chemistry did not concern itself with these already determined *actu secundo*. It focused on the *actu primo*. This is made clear by their different modes of operation. Fire chemistry achieves everything through ordinary wood or coal fire or through the use of known, ordinary water as a solvent. Secret chemistry employs a totally different type of fire, another type of water. Its solutions, calcinations and sublimations are of a totally different type than those of ordinary chemistry.[44] The processes of secret chemistry are made possible by the use of an energized solvent usually referred to as mercury, but again not ordinary mercury, but a substance that can dissolve existing entities and return them to the state of prime matter from which one can then, through the arts of secret chemistry, induce the creation of a new *actu primo* and grow it into gold. Semler assumed that the appearance of gold in certain times and places was a natural

[42] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 1, 14–15.
[43] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 1, 9.
[44] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 4, 105–106.

phenomenon, for, he argued that 'the seeds of gold are in nature's order just as are other seeds of the vegetable and animal kingdom'.[45]

Semler's question was: how can one generate gold by these means. His answer was that one could accelerate normal generation in 'the inner order of minerals' by applying and harnessing the laws governing inner matter. But here he faced a problem. Since metals that were already formed could not be further reformed, at least not through ordinary alchemical practices, and since one cannot penetrate the bowels of nature and hasten the normal development of germs already in formation, where should one turn? The answer was air, for it, like all substances, was filled with universal primary matter. Hence, when enhanced mercury is produced through the arts of secret chemistry and applied to primary matter, the adept can create a new type of latent or philosophical gold, not of the metallic kind, but as a substance having the potential to become metallic. It stood between purely metallic gold and the undetermined mass, and for this reason it 'contained a manifold, almost infinite power, allowing it to expand and to multiply. The continual *motus naturae* had a continual success; the growth of the seeds never ends'.[46] This 'philosophical gold' is the '*materia proxima* for further fermentation'. In this process, the adept uses all of his knowledge and all the skills he has acquired, which can follow many different routes but can lead to the one and same chemical success.[47]

The aspect of Semler's idea of Hermetic science that generated the most criticism from his Enlightenment contemporaries was his contention that Hermetic chemistry and medicine had to remain a secret science. He argued that they were impossible to standardize and therefore to teach openly. He took this position because he believed that Hermetic science, which deals with spiritualized matter or matter in formation, requires a certain type of person to practice it, namely one whose own spiritual sense has been awakened and heightened, who eschews worldly fame and fortune, who is in harmony with the processes of invisible nature that reveal and reflect God's wisdom. Hermetic science is the product of the private endeavors of 'quiet individuals' whose main concern is to probe the depths of living nature. Secret chemistry was a private undertaking that could never, Semler believed, be made the

[45] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 4, 30–31.
[46] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 4, 82.
[47] Semler, *Historie der Rosenkreuzer*, vol. 4, 99–100.

object of public instruction or become the possession of any group in society, because it required the personal involvement of the individual researcher with the processes of nature itself.

Tying all of these positions together was Semler's epistemological modesty. Because of nature's infinite diversity, its unlimited powers and effects, Semler argued that it was beyond the possibility of any one person, group, or age to 'lift the heavenly, infinite veil of nature'.[48] Since absolute knowledge was beyond our ken, it was imperative that each person be allowed to choose his or her own position from which to investigate nature. Only through the exercise of personal, private freedom could understanding be advanced, guided by private industriousness and moral commitment.

But even then, complete agreement can never be achieved and certainly should not be forced. Conflict and controversy are normal and lead to improvement.

> Our contemporaries have not been harmed because judgments and opinions concerning science have remained just as opposed as they were for more than a thousand or so years, not just in these chemical questions, but also as they took place in other physical, philosophical, juridical, and theological issues—have taken place to the real advantage and for the best of humankind—in which one group has always constructed systems and the other operating without systems always has multiplied the materials to be investigated and expanded the products of human knowledge.[49]

This interplay between system building and individual empirical research established, Semler believed, the dynamics for the expansion of knowledge and understanding in all realms. In order to capitalize on this process, Semler argued that the clearest way to enhance the progress of knowledge was to avoid establishing one answer, system, or solution as dominant. Instead, one should follow the middle way; encourage the free expression of private opinion and then to try to mediate between the extremes, in order to establish a creative harmony between broad vision and focused inquiry. In short, Semler's view of both private chemistry and private morals was built upon his belief in the continual expansion of private moral and physical knowledge, a never ending process, determined by a goal to be achieved.

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[48] Semler, *Von ächter hermetischer Arznei*, *Drittes Stück*, 250.
[49] *Von ächter hermetischer Arznei*, *Drittes Stück*, 295.

The intensely individualistic and spiritual nature of true Hermetic chemistry also led Semler to launch major attacks against those whom he considered to have debased the true message of secret chemistry and theosophy. In this respect, Semler seems to have followed a practice common amongst esotericists, namely to differentiate true from false prophets. But he went further than most and condemned almost all of the new Hermetic and Rosicrucian prophets. He considered most contemporary Hermeticists, Rosicrucians, and adepts to be false brothers, thinkers who posed a threat to the development of private religion and to the state. In a host of writings, Semler lambasted 'the poor students of Hermes', who, 'without brains and natural knowledge begin to collect phrases, to cook and to bake with bellows and ovens, alembics and retorts, and what ever else these are called'.[50] Semler attacked these 'new Hermeticists' on four points, maintaining: (1) That they offered no new insights regarding moral religion. All they did was mindlessly repeat the same old stuff proclaimed by earlier Rosicrucians and Hermeticists two hundred years earlier. Despite the fact that so much progress had been made in Semler's time 'in all sciences, in all arts, in all professions and general crafts', all the new Hermeticists could offer was the same old incomprehensible babble, the same 'old darkness'.[51] (2). That the new Hermeticists and Rosicrucians in their writings misused the Bible, especially the Old Testament, to authorize their message and make it more appealing. By relating the Hermetic message to parts of the Bible, they sought to give their new order a sacred ancient authority. But the invocation of the past to justify the present is a false activity, based, Semler claimed, on the mistaken idea that the moral world remains forever the same. It is about time to realize that 'the past is gone'. In fact, 'we can be blissful true, high minded Christians without knowing a syllable about Moses, Salomon, the pentacle'.[52] (3) That many of the new Hermeticists parroted their seventeenth-century predecessors by calling for a general revolution of the whole world—of all courts in Europe, of all sciences.[53] This idea was based on the misconception that a universal religion, a universal monarchy and a universal philosophy were both possible and desirable. (4) And finally, the critique that contains all the others, namely

[50] Semler, *Zusätze zu der teutschen Uebersetzung*, 9.
[51] Semler, *Zusätze zu der teutschen Uebersetzung*, 24.
[52] Semler, *Zusätze zu der teutschen Uebersetzung*, 143–144.
[53] Semler, *Zusätze zu der teutschen Uebersetzung*, xviii, 8, and 16–17.

that the new Hermeticists and Rosicrucians were seeking to create a uniform party, ruled by a single all-powerful head that would dictate what one believed and how one acted. They would, he believed, create secret societies, ruled by masters over adepts-to-be, using magic and alleged exorcism to attract followers. Many of these leaders were mere adventurers, others were power hungry reformers, still others delusional enthusiasts. But all contradicted the essential nature of Enlightenment, in the best sense of that word. In this sense they would embody the spirit of despotism, which decries the free exercise of individual investigation and toleration of the opinions of others. Thus, in Semler's view the essential distinctions between true and false Hermeticists were clear. The true Hermeticist tries to discover the basic tincture, the original philosopher's stone according to the hidden laws of growth established by God. This is a process of discovery and self-discovery, but based on laws that are regular. No outside agency is needed. False Hermeticism is magical, it claims that it needs the help of hidden spirits, that its secrets can only be known by special adepts who control secret societies; false Hermeticists believe that they can change base metals into gold by laboratory methods, which is impossible, since the *Labroranten* are working with finished products. The only way to obtain gold from base metals is to use the tincture, reduce the metals to their primary matter and then through chemical processes grow gold, based on the analogy of genesis. Finally, the true Hermeticist works quietly, seeking moral improvement through a deeper knowledge of God's majesty. The false Hermeticist, by contrast, seeks to create gold in order to win power and riches.

At the same time that Semler was involved in probing the secrets of Hermetic science, he was also attempting to chart a middle way between the claims of orthodox theology and the new assertions of natural religion. As I have argued, there was a close connection between his religious and Hermetic assumptions: the two formed a coherent system of thought and feeling. Five elements characterize Semler's approach to religion, all of which are directly related to his Hermeticism: (1) he drew a sharp distinction between public and private religion, between form and spirit, and between theology and religion; (2) he interpreted the history of Christianity as one of ever increasing knowledge into the essence of its true nature. The plot of that story was that of perfectibility, driven forward by the competition between private and public religion; (3) he made the concept of infinity central to his explication of religious history; (4) he employed the same epistemological modesty

found in his Hermetic writings in order to relativize all formal theological teachings; and (5) he argued that perfectibility could best be achieved through the free and unrestricted exercise of private, individual inquiry into religion.

In arguing these positions, Semler completely reversed the major tenets of both Catholic and Protestant orthodox theology, denying all claims that religious truth can be known for sure; that the Christian religion was fixed and best understood at the time of its inception; that the New Testament as a whole was a divinely inspired work, literally true for all believers; that religious contention and dispute were signs of a falling away from the true religion; that demons, devils, and evil spirits were part of the Christian religion and were natural phenomena; and that it was necessary for the welfare of the individual and the state to impose religious uniformity upon all of its citizens.

Semler's basic distinction between public theology—specific precipitations of religious belief occurring at a given time and place—and a more universal, moral or spiritual private religion was clearly analogous to the differentiation between perceptible matter and matter-in-formation and between publicly adopted normal science and secret, private science. He used the same metaphors of life and death to characterize them. 'Moral power, life, spirit, and effect is the beginning of the true Christian religion; one cannot hold history, memory, a dead recitation of words and teachings as the essence, as the new ability and practice of the pure Christian teachings'![54] At best the organized church could serve as the means to help one appreciate a true inner religion. It was the shell in which private religion could grow and flourish and finally lead to a new precipitation of religious experience. Thus, Semler would argue that 'a Christian's salvation does not depend on the public organized religion but rather on its contents that can only be found in private religion'.[55]

The true Christian religion, therefore, was not fully proclaimed in the Bible; rather it

> is and remains the new beginning and the source for a more perfect religion for all Christians. This perfectibility is *actu primo* there, is only in the conception [...]. There is the same infinite, constant order in the moral world as in the physical, from beginning to distant development. The maxims about the unity and permanence of the sum and contents

[54] Semler, *Zur Revision der kirchlichen Hermeneutik*, 88.
[55] Semler, *Neue Versuch*, 50.

> of the Christian message are totally false, totally unchristian, and totally contradictory to God's dignity; it is as though the real rise of the Christian religion in all peoples was once and for all apparent, as though it were already a done thing or was a mass of corporeal, simply receptive, but not active, self-realizing things. The whole history of the Christian religion contradicts this false and dangerous principle.[56]

Since the Christian religion approximated an emerging force in nature, its manifestations were infinite, its appearances and specific contents equally infinite.

> The total possible content of these new principles is therefore as infinite as their possible applications are infinite. All of the teachings that Jesus, the Apostles, and the first church fathers gave to this new religion serve merely as a guide to the individual development of better moral concepts and their application that belong to every Christian [...]. Neither Jesus, nor the Apostles, nor other early teachers have written down all of the ideas, all of the convictions, all of the steps of possible Christian belief. They were the authors of new teachings and basic truths of a spiritual or always improving religion, which should become present, develop, and continually grow in each individual Christian.[57]

As in Semler's Hermetic works, his idea of the infinity of religion implied that the formal aspect of religion was continually in flux, responding to specific conditions, individual needs, and linguistic protocols. At certain times and places, specific constellations of belief would coagulate out of the evolving substance, but they remained bound to time and space, mere local expressions of a larger, evolving spiritual process. Their authority was as limited as their origins. In this process, the real religious innovators were those 'silent' Christians who pursued the true callings of their heart without direction from the public religious institutions of the time. For this reason, Semler would plead for the right to follow one's own religious needs without interference from either state or church. A true toleration of all responsible parties and beliefs was the precondition for the further advancement of "true" religious knowledge.

Of all of the late eighteenth-century German writers who addressed the issue of toleration, Semler was probably the most fervent defender of the total toleration of all beliefs, without any demand that non-Christians should somehow accommodate their practices to those prevailing at the moment—so long as they did not extend their arguments beyond the

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[56] Semler, *Neue Versuch*, 118–119.
[57] *Neue Versuch*, 14–15.

scope of their individual, moral convictions, that is to institutionalize them. Unlike the more well-known proponents for Jewish emancipation and toleration in the late Enlightenment, Semler's plea for toleration was not accompanied by any plan for the "moral improvement" or "regeneration" of the designated group, for their eventual integration into the prevailing conventions of the dominant community, resulting ultimately in the disappearance of the tolerated religious practices. For Semler, toleration was not the vehicle to achieve civic unity, leading, in the end, to a slow disappearance of all "sects". Semler's affirmation of the necessity for religious innovation, carried forth by individuals—often persecuted as heretics—should rather be seen as an assertion of the centrality of religion as an existential reality, and not merely as a point of doctrinal agreement.

This absolute commitment to toleration, to the free exercise of one's spiritual capabilities, stands out, I believe, as Semler's most important legacy. Although it corresponded to the highest ideals of the Enlightenment, its roots lay as much in Semler's combination of theosophy with Hermetic chemistry. In this sense, Semler's case helps us to better understand the complex interaction between seemingly incompatible assumptions, warning us to avoid categorizing Hermeticists as opponents of the Enlightenment, or Enlightenment figures as the arch-enemies of Hermeticism.

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THE MASONIC NECROMANCER: SHIFTING IDENTITIES IN THE LIVES OF JOHANN GEORG SCHREPFER

Renko Geffarth

When in October 1774 a suicide in a forest near Leipzig was reported to the local authorities, it was the climax and at the same time the spectacular ending of a short, yet mysterious and sensational life. The man who shot himself on this autumn night had gained a dubious reputation in electoral Saxony. He was known as a coffeehouse-keeper, French nobleman and colonel, Freemason, magician, and necromancer. He had a number of friends, sponsors, and disciples, among whom were a minister of the Saxon government, the Duke of Kurland, and several members of Leipzig's Freemasons' lodge called 'Minerva'. Johann Georg Schrepfer's personality appears to fit well into the pattern of eighteenth-century adventurers such as Casanova and Cagliostro, although Schrepfer is not as well-known as they were to their contemporaries and still are to us today.[1]

So besides being an impostor and swindler or, as he was called in the magazines, a '*Windbeutel*',[2] what was it that made him famous as well as notorious all over the *Ancien Régime*? What was his necromancy like? How did the Freemasons consider him and his (Para)masonic rituals? What kind of light does his example shed on practical eighteenth-century magic? Would he from our twenty-first century perspective be considered a genuine esotericist or a swindler? And to what extent do discussions, narrations, and legends derived from Schrepfer's performances constitute a polemical debate, contemporary and historical?

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[1] In contemporary and historical accounts of eighteenth-century adventurers Schrepfer is named together with Cagliostro, Mesmer, and Gassner; see e.g. Sierke, *Schwärmer und Schwindler*. Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin compares Schrepfer to Cagliostro; see Saint-Martin, *Apodiktische Erklärung*, 131.

[2] Nicolai, 'Rezension', 272.

1. *Mediocrity and Imposture—Shifting Identities*

Let us begin with a short glimpse of Schrepfer's biography.[3] Not much is known of him before he came to Leipzig in August 1761, and all available information has to be scrutinized with respect to its potentially tendentious Masonic perspective.[4] Johann Georg Schrepfer, or Schroepfer, born in Nuremberg in 1739, was a man of poor education, no erudition, and rough manners.[5] His profession was that of a cooper. He had served in the Prussian Army during the Seven Years War before he came to Leipzig to start his Masonic and necromantic career. He then became a citizen of the Saxon town of fairs and trade and was listed as a '*Weinschenk*'. In September 1761 he married Johanna Katharina Herr, daughter of a local tailor, and became the tenant of a wine-tavern in the Boettchergaesschen. Eight years later, in 1769, he took over a more famous tavern, the 'Weissleder'sche Kaffeewirthschaft', a coffeehouse right in the center of Leipzig. This coffeehouse became the focus of necromantic interest in Saxony in the early 1770s, when Schrepfer started to perform his necromancy and to initiate disciples into his own Masonic lodge in his private home. The lodge was at the center of his efforts to establish a system of "true freemasonry": Its members met to perform Masonic rituals as well as necromantic experiments, both of which followed the distinctive rules of Schrepfer's "system".

When Schrepfer tried to take over the master's position in Leipzig's Freemasons' lodge 'Minerva', he came into conflict with the protector of the Saxon lodges, the Duke of Kurland, as he claimed its members were misled by the Masonic system of the '*Strikte Observanz*' which he considered a depraved kind of freemasonry.[6] Despite his dubious reputation, Schrepfer went to Dresden soon thereafter and contacted the court directly to offer an economic plan that would earn Saxony's public purse millions. He met the Minister Friedrich Ludwig von

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[3] All biographical data, unless otherwise noted, taken from the entry 'Schrepfer' in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (ADB), vol. 32, 490–491.

[4] The most detailed and probably most reliable source of information on Schrepfer's activities in Leipzig is Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, which includes a number of letters and papers penned by Schrepfer, his adherents, and adversaries. This volume seems to have served as the basis for all later historical accounts of Schrepfer's life.

[5] The entry in the *ADB* dates Schrepfer's birth to 1730, but since his age at his death in 1774 was noted as '35', it is more likely to be 1739. See Findel, *Verirrungen*, 70.

[6] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 3–4.

Wurmb who was a skeptic concerning Schrepfer's magic, but who of course had professional interest in a fiscal bargain that he suspected came from the Jesuits.[7] To convince Wurmb and the Saxon court of his abilities and the authority of his superiors, Schrepfer performed a necromantic session—like seventeenth-century alchemists, he combined business and magic.[8]

Having gained some influence in Leipzig's Freemasonic scene, Schrepfer grew bolder in his imposture and, in September 1774, acted as French nobleman under the name 'Baron Stein von Steinbach'.[9] He succeeded in deceiving some of his Masonic friends, but when the envoy of the French court in electoral Saxony, Marboies, found out about his pretense, he demanded that Schrepfer present a written proof of his legitimacy.[10] Schrepfer was unable to do so and preferred to escape from Dresden to Leipzig where he felt safe from prosecution.[11] A few weeks later, Schrepfer could no longer bear the pressure of his prosecutors, and, after another necromantic session in his coffeehouse, he put an end to his life.[12]

2. *The Lodge as a Vehicle of Defining Identity: Schrepfer's Masonic Career*

After establishing himself as coffeehouse-keeper in Leipzig, Schrepfer founded his personal Masonic lodge and recruited not only "profanes" and women but also members of Leipzig's leading Freemasons' lodge 'Minerva'. The legitimacy and authenticity of his own Masonic system was his main argument in his competition with 'Minerva': In a leaflet that Schrepfer delivered in the streets of Leipzig in August 1773, he published the initiation rites of the 'Minerva' lodge—a breach of the secrecy of Freemasonry—and accused the lodge of deceiving its initiates and demanding inappropriate fees for elevating them to higher Masonic degrees.[13] When Schrepfer continued his incriminations in the presence of the lodge's protector, the Duke of Kurland, he was

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[7] Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 6–7.

[8] Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 7–8.

[9] Letter to Georg Christoph von Roepert, 4 November 1774, quoted in Frick, *Die Erleuchteten*, 452–453; Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 193, gives the name 'Baron von Steinbach'.

[10] The envoy's letter to Schrepfer is printed in Bekker, *Bedenken*, 26; a translation is given in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 209–210.

[11] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 65 (see also footnote).

[12] Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 19, and *Beylagen* 14.

[13] Quoted and printed in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 28 and 93–94.

arrested and punished by '*200 Arsprügel*' ('strokes on the bottom') for his disorderly conduct.[14] The receipt he had to sign for this penalty was published in several newspapers, but Schrepfer himself publicly denied not only that he had signed the receipt, but also that he had been punished at all:[15] According to his own point of view, the reported punishment was nothing but defamation. Furthermore, he would accept neither the legitimacy nor the authority of a society seeking to revive the order of the Knights Templar under the name of freemasonry. To restore his dignity, Schrepfer went to Brunswick and returned with a letter from the Grand Master of German freemasonry, Duke Ferdinand, who recommended him to the Leipzig lodge, particularly emphasizing Schrepfer's 'sciences'.[16] This letter served as Schrepfer's ticket to the lodge's sessions and convinced his opponents, at least for a short period of time.

Before initiating new members, Schrepfer examined them carefully, using mysterious rituals that confirmed his reputation. The room where the examination took place was decorated only with a table that carried a bowl of punch, salad, candles, and glasses of water. Talking about everyday topics at first, he then interviewed the candidate about the immortality of the soul and life after death. Occasionally throughout the ritual, Schrepfer would take a glass of water and inspect it by looking at it and drinking from it while standing in front of a mirror. This procedure served as a test of the candidate's integrity: clear water signaled an honest desire to be initiated, while cloudy water revealed pretense.[17]

When he felt he had recruited enough members of the 'Minerva' for his own system, Schrepfer entered a session of the lodge by force and expelled the Master with the aid of a pistol, claiming the Master's position for himself.[18] In the summer of 1774, he succeeded in taking over the chair of the lodge, and his Masonic enemies were said to finally have submitted to his authority. The system of the '*Strikte Observanz*' was abolished and replaced by Schrepfer's necromantic sessions, which

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[14] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 121; the duke's order to the local authorities, dated 10 September 1773, is printed in Erdmann, 'Ueber Cagliostro', 115.

[15] The receipt was published in the newspaper *Wandsbeker Bote* No. 167, 12 October 1773, Schrepfer's counterstatement in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 29 October 1773; cf. Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 43–44, 123–126; Bekker, *Bedenken*, 32.

[16] Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 5.

[17] The whole ceremony as described in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 196–198, footnote.

[18] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 20 and 199.

he claimed to be the source of true freemasonry.[19] The role Schrepfer played in Leipzig became well-known in the German Masonic scene, and a few months later when 'the greatest Freemason of all times'—as he was called in a letter from a French brother[20]—had killed himself, it was general disillusionment that made the lodge and its members regard this episode as a case of embarrassing aberrations.[21]

3. *Between Freemasonry, Natural Magic, and Esotericism? Schrepfer's Necromancy*

Johann Georg Schrepfer had a remarkable ability to stage necromantic performances that captivated his spectators throughout all-night sessions, repeated over the course of weeks and months. He raised the spirits of deceased celebrities of old and recent times and impressed his public by talking to the spirits and giving them orders.[22] The apparitions were said to be clearly visible, clothed according to the habits of their lifetime, hanging in the air, and screaming awfully. His spectators described the faces of the spirits they witnessed as human, but the material looked more like smoke or vapor than flesh and skin. By means of enthusiastic speeches, prayers, aromatic smoke, and punch-drinking, Schrepfer caught the attention of his audience or, as his critics wrote, dazed them.[23] During his sessions, beginning at midnight, the spectators had to remain seated, having been told that they would face immense danger if they disobeyed this rule. To complete the rituals of his ceremonies, Schrepfer performed blessings and used crucifixes and holy water.[24]

Among the most impressive examples of raised spirits were those of the two Danish traitors Struensee and Brandt, whose beheading in 1772 had made the news all over Europe. In 1773, the first of his two

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[19] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 4, 10.

[20] Letter from a certain du Porte, August 1774, in: *Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin, Freimaurerlogen und freimaurerähnliche Vereinigungen*, 5.2 B 113 *Johannisloge Carl zur gekrönten Säule*, Braunschweig, Nr. 661: *Briefe und Actenstücke über Schrepfer und dessen Herkommen*.

[21] Cf. the entry on Schrepfer in the *Internationales Freimaurerlexikon*, 758–759; Erdmann, 'Ueber Cagliostro', 114–116.

[22] The following descriptions are compiled from the reports of witnesses as published in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*; Crusius, *Bedenken*, and 'Auszug eines Schreibens'.

[23] E.g. Nicolai, 'Rezension', 274.

[24] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 201.

successful necromantic years, Schrepfer made them appear in his lodge with their heads in their hands and wearing the same clothes as on the day of their execution.[25] But when he was asked to raise the spirit of the famous poet Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, known in person to some of Schrepfer's spectators, he refused to do so, arguing that this would go beyond his necromantic abilities.[26]

To impress his Masonic audiences, Schrepfer evoked the spirit of the Templars' last Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, during a session in Dresden, and ordered him to travel to Frankfurt and visit Schrepfer's companion, a man named Gradmann. Molay obeyed, and a few minutes later the spirit returned with a receipt that apparently had been signed in Frankfurt.[27] During another session, also in Dresden, Schrepfer called the spirit of one 'C.F.S. G.F.M.' who appeared in his full shape, engulfed by flames and roaring dreadfully, pleading with Schrepfer not to torture him in such a way.[28] Before calling this spirit, Schrepfer had raised a number of tutelary spirits that announced their presence by a tone that sounded like ringing glass, a sound which remained audible for hours. The whole performance was so horrifying that Schrepfer himself remarked that he would never repeat it, since this kind of necromancy could prove lethal the next time it was performed.[29]

According to contemporary descriptions, Schrepfer distinguished between two classes of magical works, '*pneumatische*' and '*elementarische*'. Pneumatic necromancy meant the calling of spirits, while elementary necromancy focused on the use of light—each person he conjured up appeared in a different light. The spirits of the deceased would appear in three different states, described as 'good', 'medium', and 'damned'.[30] During his conjurations, Schrepfer himself usually turned pale, a state that was understood as the effect of some demonic power acting upon him and that he tried to hold off by carrying a crucifix. Other so-called elementary works, which he performed in the countryside, made stars shine brighter or thunderstorms arise at Schrepfer's command;[31] thus, necromancy was the most impressing, but not the only kind of magical performances that Schrepfer undertook.

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[25] Bekker, *Bedenken*, 10.
[26] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 203.
[27] Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 11.
[28] Bekker, *Bedenken*, 22–23.
[29] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 206–207, Bekker, *Bedenken*, 24.
[30] Bekker, *Bedenken*, 15–17, 21–22.
[31] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 205.

So what was his necromancy like? Was it nothing but deceit, or is there anything to suggest that Schrepfer himself took it all seriously? Or, as the theologian Johann August Ernesti, quoted in Johann Salomo Semlers *Samlungen*, put it, was Schrepfer an impostor or a fanatic who believed in the integrity of his necromantic actions?[32] Looking at his own written remarks, he appears to have had little training using *refined skills* like writing and conversation,[33] but he definitely had quite some knowledge of freemasonry, magic, and at least a popular kind of numerology. This allowed him to support his actions by means of appropriate rituals and cryptic symbolism.[34] So even if the spirits he called did not actually appear, he still may have been serious in claiming to be able to come into contact with them—he may have understood the actors he needed to perform his rituals as merely the representations of the actual spirits.

4. *Necromancy—Practical Magic or Instrument of Deceit? A Polemical Debate*

Having as many critics as admirers, Schrepfer was at the center of a wide range of discussions. These discussions were largely predicated on the polemical stance of Schrepfer's opponents: From their perspective, he was an impostor and swindler, deceiving his audiences for his own personal benefit and disseminating superstition. On the other hand, he—at least temporarily—won over members of the educated class, who joined in the debate in order to defend their master. Altogether, he was paid as much attention by adversaries and adherents.

The debate developed in three different stages: First of all, the magician himself used polemics in his competition with Leipzig's leading Freemasons' lodge 'Minerva', questioning their legitimacy and unveiling their secrets, thereby defining his own Masonic identity. Secondly, a debate between adherents and adversaries unfolded in printed publications. Finally, as a result of this debate, the story of the necromancer became a *topos* in fictional and historical literature.

As we might expect, many of his critics, especially the "enlightened" ones, were utterly skeptical and suspected that the magic shows were

[32] Ernesti, 'Inhalt des lehrreichen Zusazes', 82.

[33] Cf. the copies of Schrepfer's letters in Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', *Beylagen* IV–V.

[34] Cf. the "cabalistic" sheet printed in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, between 98 and 99.

based on optical illusions—a séance is reported where one of the spectators, a merchant, hid under a table and identified one of the apparitions as Schrepfer's domestic; the merchant recognized that the shoes of the "spirit" had been bought in his own shop the day before. The same skeptical spectator managed to lock the doors before one of the sessions begun. Surprisingly, the spirits had to stay outside rather than, as disembodied beings, move through closed doors, thereby giving the skeptic strong evidence of their physical nature.[35] The undeniable fact that the majority of Schrepfer's audience nevertheless believed what they witnessed was, in this skeptical perspective, seen as the result of a combination of being enclosed in darkness and intoxication.

To sum up, "enlightened" interpretations and explanations of Schrepfer's necromancy varied from adducing psychological causes, such as suspecting the magician of trickery by deceiving the senses,[36] to attributing the effects to mere optical illusions caused by using pseudo-magic apparatuses like the *laterna magica*, concave mirrors, or opaque smoke.[37] However, these psychological and technical explications were not generally accepted as sufficient: none of the few eyewitnesses who considered themselves to be impartial observers reported to have discovered the use of any apparatus of this kind.[38] They assumed that Schrepfer was indeed able to command demonic powers that could delude the senses of his audience. This conclusion could be drawn from the argument that there was no evidence for the suggestion that the apparitions were faked by means of technical equipment—even by those who felt that magical operations were inconsistent with both reason and faith.[39] Thus, like other popular showmen of *magia naturalis*, Schrepfer profited from the ambivalence of an age when no distinct boundary had as yet been drawn between "enlightened" skepticism and "regressive" superstition.[40] This ambiguity made it possible for

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[35] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 203–204, 206.

[36] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 201; Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 15.

[37] Mendelssohn, 'Anmerkungen', 279–280; Bekker, *Bedenken*, 16. On the *laterna magica* cf. Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 81–84.

[38] Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 15; the *laterna magica* theory was dismissed in 'Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey', 174–175, as was the hypothesis that Schrepfer used a variety of mirrors, ibid. 190–191.

[39] In the aforementioned 'Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey', 191, the protagonists of the (fictitious?) discussion arrive at the conclusion that, since there is no satisfactory physical explanation, Schrepfer must have applied 'theurgische, das ist, magische, zauberische Künste'.

[40] See Hochadel, *Öffentliche Wissenschaft*, 293–295.

Schrepfer's spectators to follow his performances with skeptical amusement or shivering fascination.

Shortly after the necromancer's death, in 1775, a debate unfolded in journals and publications, triggered by an anonymously published article that was penned by Christian August Crusius, a theologian in Leipzig who had been asked by an interested nobleman to give his opinion on Schrepfer's performances. Crusius relied on a single anonymous eyewitness, complaining about the inconsistence of the manifold accounts he knew. His main argument was that Schrepfer had mingled Catholic Christian rituals and pagan magic in the name of Jesus Christ—the necromantic sessions had been an expression of Crypto-Catholicism. Crusius' conclusion was that Schrepfer should be regarded as a sign of the coming of the Antichrist.[41]

This radical, rather apocalyptic perspective provoked various reactions in the same year. The first to accept the challenge was 'Balthasar Bekker der jüngere', an unknown author who claimed to be the grandson of the Dutch theologian Balthasar Bekker who in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had initiated a debate on witchcraft that had involved philosophers like Christian Thomasius.[42] Bekker doubted the reliability of Crusius' eyewitness, thereby accusing Crusius of displaying a lack of critical sense and of interpreting the séances without understanding sufficiently the common techniques of *magia naturalis*.[43] Bekker went so far as to call some of Crusius' explanations simple-minded ('*einfältig*').[44]

This publication was reviewed in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* by Friedrich Nicolai, who mocked Schrepfer as a charlatan and '*abgefeimter Bube*' ('cunning fellow') and his devotees as credulous enthusiasts ('*Schwärmer*').[45] Nicolai considered Schrepfer's success a symptom of the superstition and prejudice that were still influential among the learned.[46] His opinion on Crusius was quite similar to Bekker's: Nicolai suggested that Crusius was generally known as a theologian who explained almost everything by referring to demonic powers ('*Mitwürkung des Teufels*'),

[41] Crusius, *Bedenken*; the question was: 'Was von den, von dem berufenen Schroepfer verbreiteten Gerüchten zu halten, als ob derselbe habe Geister erscheinen lassen, und dergleichen, und wie die ganze Sache anzusehen sey?'

[42] Bekker, *Bedenken*; on his being Balthasar Bekker's grandson, ibid., 27.

[43] Bekker, *Bedenken*, 14, 23.

[44] Bekker, *Bedenken*, 24.

[45] Nicolai, 'Rezension', 273–275.

[46] Nicolai, 'Rezension', 275.

and therefore Bekker's comments were superfluous for those who wished to judge the validity of Crusius' arguments.[47] More to the point, he suggested, were the '*Anmerkungen*' published by the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who had also commented on Crusius in 1775. Mendelssohn pointed out that the Freemasons, who were the audience at Schrepfer's performances, were used to expecting miraculous phenomena and were thus susceptible to believing in 'artificial fraud' ('*künstlichen Betrug*') of the kind that Schrepfer presented.[48] Contrary to Nicolai, Mendelssohn did not content himself with merely satirizing Schrepfer, but went into technical details about the *laterna magica* and concave mirrors, although in conclusion he did not abstain from ridiculing Crusius' '*metaphysische Möglichkeit*' ('metaphysical possibility') of spirits actually appearing in one or another way.[49]

Bekker's and Mendelssohn's commentaries occasioned a detailed response by the famous theologian Johann Salomo Semler, who was professor at the University of Halle and a major exponent of eighteenth-century enlightened theology. Semler commented on Crusius and Bekker, reprinted Mendelssohn's text and added a longish article in which he put forth his own perspective on Schrepfer.[50] Semler's argument rested on the conviction that the physical existence of the '*Teufelsreich*' was of no relevance whatsoever for Christians and that all notions of angels and demons in the Bible were adopted from '*Chaldäern, Egyptiern etc.*' and could not be considered as part of divine revelation.[51] Thus he rejected the position represented by Crusius, who conceded the possibility of demons acting upon the human soul; this would, Semler felt, add up to believing in Schrepfer's necromantic competences.[52] Semler insisted that Schrepfer's performances were nothing but '*Hocuspocusstreiche*', as could readily be seen from the fact that Schrepfer himself was an impostor.[53] The fact that the theologian wished to engage in this debate was probably due to his desire to combat what he considered to be superstition—he could not remain passive when a colleague of his supported irrational beliefs.

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[47] Nicolai, 'Rezension', 276–277.
[48] Mendelssohn, 'Anmerkungen', 278–279.
[49] Mendelssohn, 'Anmerkungen', 279–281, quotation 281.
[50] Semler, 'Anmerkungen'. On Semler, see also Peter Hanns Reill's chapter in the present volume.
[51] Semler, 'Anmerkungen', 21–23.
[52] Semler, 'Anmerkungen', 25, 33.
[53] Semler, 'Anmerkungen', 29, 35–36.

The latest contribution to the controversy initiated by Crusius was an apparently fictitious dialogue, '*von Schröpfers Zauberey*', that was published in 1777.[54] Again, Schrepfer was assessed and Crusius' and Bekker's texts were commented upon; the protagonists—quoted only by their initials—were supposed to be theologians who had different opinions on whether Schrepfer's séances were the result of '*natürliche Künste*' ('natural arts'), fraud, or genuine magic. The pros and cons of all three possible solutions to Schrepfer's mystery were discussed; Bekker's suspicion concerning the *laterna magica* was dismissed, and finally the debaters agreed that necromancy was '*magische, zauberische Künste*' ('magical, enchanting arts').[55] At the same time, Crusius' notion that Schrepfer signaled the coming of the Antichrist was rehabilitated and complemented with a reference to Crypto-Catholicism.[56]

From Crusius to the *Gespräch*, we have seen how adversaries and adherents not only discussed Schrepfer's activities, but magic in general. On the one hand, Bekker tried to ridicule Schrepfer as well as Crusius, while Semler tried to deconstruct superstition on scientific grounds. On the other hand, Crusius argued that it may well be possible for demons to appear on earth, and in the *Gespräch* his "metaphysical" position was defended against all earlier attacks. Some of the combatants employed strategies that can be seen as polemical, according to the criteria suggested by Wouter J. Hanegraaff: There are protagonists who feel an urge to express their opinion, it is 'not entirely clear' what should be thought of Schrepfer and necromancy, the debate has a target, it is published in books and journals, and some of the arguments are rather crude, using invectives such as '*Windbeutel*'.[57] Still, the debate shows how in the 1770s public opinion and theological perspectives on magic in the broadest sense of the word were not clearly oriented in one or the other direction. Despite its partially polemical tenor, the debate did not result in any final decision on whether Schrepfer had been an impostor or not.

By contrast, the literary accounts of Schrepfer's life, which were written years and decades after his spectacular demise, have arrived at some degree of consensus: the necromancer is an oddity, a fairy-tale figure in the age of Enlightenment. A typical nineteenth-century

[54] 'Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey'.
[55] 'Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey', 191.
[56] 'Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey', 194.
[57] Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge', 226–227.

example is Theodor Fontane's description of how Schrepfer won over wealthy and educated men in Leipzig; Fontane tells his story ironically, and although he does not engage in polemics against Schrepfer, he has no respect for the magician's admirers.[58] Goethe, Wieland, and Jean Paul mention Schrepfer; in their works he becomes a recurring metaphor for the archetypal impostor and adventurer. The opinion that many Masons had once held, i.e. that Schrepfer was a remarkable man, is now generally reinterpreted as an embarrassment for the history of freemasonry.[59] Schrepfer was included in books on magicians and swindlers, works which reproduced the polemical opinions of his critics, and presented Schrepfer's life as a cautionary tale designed to deter readers from superstition and 'pseudo-masonic aberrations'.

5. *Charlatanism or Magic? The Debate on Necromancy in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany*

There was an extensive debate among philosophers and theologians in late eighteenth-century Germany about what might happen to the human soul after physical death.[60] A famous example is Kant's view of Emanuel Swedenborg's concept of a spirit world, published anonymously in his *Träume eines Geistersehers* (1766).[61] At the time of Schrepfer's appearance in public, this partly enlightened, partly inspired discourse had not yet arrived at a definite rejection of the existence of spirits and specters—it was still common sense that they did exist. However, the possibility of apparitions perceptible by the human senses, of visualizing and materializing spirits, was increasingly doubted. In this respect, there was an important difference between Lutheran and Catholic churches: The Protestant churches *grosso modo* denied the existence of angels and demons and rejected the possibility that the souls of the deceased could wander among the living. Catholic doctrine, on the other hand, accepted not only the reality of angels and demons, but also that souls could appear from heaven or out of purgatory and take on a perceptible form.[62] A famous example of the official acceptance of the existence

[58] Fontane, *Wanderungen*, 302–303.

[59] Kalka, *Wir haben Mehreres erwartet*. I am grateful to the author for having made his manuscript accessible to me.

[60] On the debate as a whole cf. Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 56–84; Sawicki, 'Die Gespenster'.

[61] See Weissberg, *Geistersprache*.

[62] Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 59–65.

of angels and demons was the Bavarian priest Johann Joseph Gassner, a contemporary of Schrepfer, who was allowed to perform exorcisms in the diocese of Regensburg.[63]

With this in mind, it is not surprising that Schrepfer was accused of Crypto-Catholicism, and with his extensive usage of holy water and incense he seemed to confirm this accusation. His necromancy, however, would have brought him into conflict with the Catholic Church, even if the Church had accepted that his rituals worked: necromancy was considered a demonic delusion and was therefore strictly prohibited.[64] Although a categorization in such terms may be rather anachronistic, Schrepfer's position was certainly far closer to Masonic esotericism than to orthodox Christianity.

6. *An Esoteric Impostor?*

Although Schrepfer was considered a swindler and impostor by many of his contemporaries, he managed to acquire loans from some of his devotees, debts that were never paid off.[65] In spite of the fact that he left behind liabilities rather than assets, not even his opponents such as the Saxon minister Wurmb accused him of financial fraud.[66] Apparently, discretely losing money was less embarrassing than openly admitting that one had believed in such a dubious figure.

At first glance, Schrepfer quite obviously matches the contemporarily well-known pattern of popular showmen and impostors like Cagliostro. This will have assured his temporary success as well as his dubious reputation in eighteenth-century Saxony. The contemporary "public opinion" was divided between outright rejection and uncritical enthusiasm, with supporters and detractors paying equal attention to him and his magic. His necromancy was performed as a mixture of religious and Masonic rituals, appealing both to "Christians" and "esotericists". Schrepfer was a virtuoso at using symbolism and spiritual practices derived from freemasonry, his understanding of kabbalistic thought, and Christian religion, and he managed to fascinate his public in many ways.

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[63] On Gassner see Midelfort, *Exorcism*.
[64] Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 61.
[65] Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 180–181.
[66] Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 19.

What his own convictions really may have been is something we can only guess at, based on the evidence of his performances and the letters he left behind. To modern observers, he may appear to have misled his supporters for his own personal fame and benefit. It can be tempting to explain Schrepfer's career by attributing motives such as pure egocentrism or drive for prestige to him, but ultimately such an explanation is not very satisfying. The most important aspect about Schrepfer's "Masonic necromancy" is its symbolical function: In analogy to the initiation ceremony to the master's degree, necromancy is the preferential way to gain access to higher secret knowledge. During the initiation ritual, the initiate is raised from his symbolic grave, following the legend of Hiram.[67] Schrepfer took the legend literally and interpreted it as the calling of spirits, culminating in the conjuration of Jacques de Molay. Thus, the necromantic performances definitely were an expression of the esoteric quest for higher knowledge. For the spectators, pursuing this quest indicated neither superstition nor simple-mindedness, but was rather evidence of a serious spiritual endeavor.

Although we do not know if Schrepfer himself was aware of this context, his Masonic audiences should have realized it, and therefore his success may have been based on the fact that he seemed to fulfill one of the most important Masonic promises. Consequently, Freemasons of his epoch were partly impressed, partly annoyed by his efforts to construct a Masonic ritual that he claimed to be the only authentic version. This makes Schrepfer resemble other Masonic impostors who irritated and influenced European freemasonry from time to time—the former superintendent Dietrich Schumacher alias Philipp Samuel Rosa had been successful with his '*Clermont-Rosasches Kapitel*' in the nearby cities of Halle and Jena only a decade before.[68] Although it remains an open question whether Schrepfer was just a swindler or an esotericist, the role of freemasonry in Schrepfer's career is quite clear: being the most widespread and generally approved form of institutionalized esotericism of his age, the lodge served as the symbolic and organizational background for his performances. Accepting the legend of Hiram in the Master's degree at face value matched the esoteric interests of Schrepfer's Masonic audiences. And it was Masonic tradition that popularized Schrepfer for at least two centuries.

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[67] Neugebauer-Wölk, 'Geheimnis und Öffentlichkeit', 20–21.

[68] Cf. the entries 'Rosa, Philipp Samuel' and 'Clermont, Kapitel von' in the *Internationales Freimaurerlexikon*, 182–183 and 714–715.

7. *Epilogue: Schrepfer's Suicide as the Ultimate Necromantic Performance*

Returning to where we started from, let us have a look at Schrepfer's suicide again. He had just accomplished another necromantic session in his coffeehouse, a ritual that was so exceptionally successful that Schrepfer and his audience had been forced to leave the room to which the spirits had been called and to wait for their disappearance before continuing their séance.[69] He then invited his devotees to go for a walk at midnight and promised to let them share in another event, one that would be as exceptional as any they had ever seen and probably would ever see again. They walked to the Rosenthal, a forest near Leipzig, where Schrepfer suddenly disappeared. A shot sounded, and he was found dead. Despite this obviously rather distressing experience, some of the witnesses would claim that the shot had not been lethal and that Schrepfer had vanished in some supernatural way. The belief in the dignity of their master was strong enough to survive his dishonorable death: apparently his resurrection would only require yet another necromantic ritual.

The investigation of the suicide that took place within the following days revealed that Schrepfer had announced his ending in sealed letters addressed to his companions and that he had bid farewell to his wife and children. This indeed seemed to confirm the suspicion of fraud. The secrets he had promised to reveal to the public after his demise, items sealed in a heavy package, turned out to be a heap of underwear and stones.[70] What Schrepfer had pretended to be the contents of his secrets remains unknown, but presumably they must have referred to his Masonic system, not to his necromancy. The radical uncovering and exposing of the non-existence of Schrepfer's secret knowledge distinguishes him from other "esotericists" of his age, such as the secret orders or the Masonic system of the *Strikte Observanz*: esoteric "secrets" tend to lead to the gradual disillusionment of their supporters, who interpret their disappointment as their own individual failure or their lack of virtue. In Schrepfer's case, there obviously was no secret knowledge, beyond the fact that we do not have any evidence of how

[69] The description of the necromancer's ending and the following investigation is compiled from Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 18–22, and Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 211–212.

[70] The skeptics among his disciples had not kept their promise to leave the package closed and had opened it three weeks before Schrepfer's death; cf. Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie'; *Beylagen*, 11.

his necromancy was performed. Thus, the techniques of the magician and showman have remained his secrets until today. Apart from that, Schrepfer kept his mysterious aura, and when a decade later two of Schrepfer's disciples impressed the successor to the Prussian throne, Frederick William, with necromantic sessions, they passed on the legacy of a dazzling late eighteenth-century personage.

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PART THREE

LEGITIMATING IDENTITIES IN MODERN CULTURE

RENÉ GUÉNON AND THE TRADITIONALIST POLEMIC[1]

Brannon Ingram

René Guénon (1886–1951) is the principal founder of a current of western esoteric thought now known as Traditionalism.[2] While there are varying degrees of commitment to the core ideas of Traditionalism, Traditionalists typically uphold a belief that there is a single universal truth, a *philosophia perennis*, revealed to humanity during the earliest stages of human history. Comprising what Traditionalists call "metaphysics", this truth is expressed in the various religions of the world through myth and symbol, exoteric forms that express a timeless, ahistorical esoteric essence. Traditionalists usually believe that the world's religions offer relatively equal access to this truth. Other important features of Traditionalist thought include the belief that history has undergone a gradual decline from the ages when people ascertained this truth in its purest form, and that the modern West, essentially from the seventeenth century to the present, is a gross aberration from this primordial tradition.[3]

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[1] This paper is the outcome of my Master's thesis research at the University of Leiden as a Fulbright-Netherlands America Foundation Fellow, written under the direction of P. S. van Koningsveld. I credit a number of conversations with Steven Wasserstrom of Reed College with my interest in this subject. I am especially grateful to Jean-Pierre Brach for several insightful critiques of a draft of this paper.

[2] Mark Sedgwick notes in his recent study of the Traditionalists that they 'constitute a movement in the loosest sense of the word. The Traditionalist movement has no formal structure, and since the late 1940s no central command. It is made up of a number of groups and individuals, united by their common debt to the work of René Guénon' (Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 22).

[3] By Guénon's death in 1951, Traditionalism had gained a fairly wide readership. The most important Traditionalist after Guénon is Frithjof Schuon, who converted to Islam and established a branch of the North African ʿAlawiyya Sufi order which was later renamed the Maryamiyya, explicitly oriented toward European converts to Islam and grounded in Muslim-Christian ecumenicism. In America Schuon established a community in Bloomington, Indiana, and gradually de-emphasized Islam as such and adopted Native American spiritual practices. For an insightful overview of the Maryamiyya based in part on research at the Traditionalist center in Bloomington, see J. Vahid Brown's unpublished essay, 'Ironic Traditionalism: A Brief History of the Maryamiyya'. Meanwhile, the controversial Italian Traditionalist Julius Evola worked to popularize the ideas of Guénon among the far Right. Other Traditionalists, such as Martin Lings and Titus Burckhardt, have become well established writers on Sufism

Guénon believed that the modern West must undergo complete and total reformation, if not destruction, before it can realign itself with the *philosophia perennis* from which it has allegedly strayed. His writing is contentious, programmatic, and highly polemical. Polemic is, in fact, one of the principal modes of discourse that Guénon used to express his ideas in print.

Guénon's inquiries into the symbolic systems of the world's religions are dense and encyclopedic. The content of his work, however, is framed by hostility toward any reductive analysis of religion, and even the academic study of religion *tout court*. Yet form and content are inseparable in Guénon: his polemical tone shapes his method of understanding religious data. His anathema toward historicizing religion, thus, is inseparable from his anathema toward history itself.

Having said this, my intention here is neither to defend nor criticize his methodology for studying religion. Rather, this paper is a study of polemic in the works of Guénon and the social and historical complexity that he obscures beneath his rhetoric. Guénon's writings are prolific and cover a vast array of topics in comparative religions and beyond, ranging from Chinese philosophy to Christian symbolism, from mathematics to freemasonry, from Dante to the Vedanta. For reasons of limited space I cannot explore any of these topics in depth; rather, I will explore how Guénon frames and organizes this vast body of knowledge rhetorically.

As a rhetorical stratagem, polemic functions by creating polarities. It is by definition inflexible, and does not attend to subtleties of debate. Guénon's work exhibits many such polarities: East/West, traditional/modern, synthesis/analysis, essential/accidental, necessary/contingent, superior/inferior, elite/common, spiritual/temporal, order/disorder, permanence/flux, knowledge/action. In each of these, the first term is unequivocally positive and the second unequivocally negative. These polarities are reflected in Guénon's construction of two implied audiences: those who comprehend the one true tradition that he advocates, and those who do not.

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and Islamic art, respectively. Guénon's influence on the comparative religionists Mircea Eliade and Huston Smith is noteworthy here as well. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, finally, is arguably the most well known Traditionalist writing on Islamic subjects and practicing in academia today.

While I have no space to address each of these rhetorical features here, there are three aspects of polemic in Guénon's work that I will discuss: his polemic against the West on behalf of the East, his polemic against modern esotericism on behalf of "tradition", and finally, his polemic against the academic study of religion. Above all, I will attempt to place these polarities into a wider context to show how, in many ways, Guénon's thought draws on aspects of the very European intellectual tradition that he disavows. Despite his protests against the modern West, he is both modern *and* western.

Guénon's place in the history of western esotericism is widely contested.[4] Indeed, he devoted much of his early career to a systematic denunciation of esoteric traditions. Why include him in a volume on western esotericism and polemics? Substantively, Guénon's subjects of interest only partly coincided with those of major currents in western esotericism, such as Hermeticism, alchemy, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism, Christian kabbalah, Illuminism, theosophy, and the various New Age movements.[5] Guénon deals only tangentially with most of these currents. However, for the purposes of this volume, I rely more on structural rather than substantive discussions of the esoteric; in other words, here I am more interested in what the "esoteric" *does* rather than what it is. Guénon's work is "esocentric",[6] privileging the esoteric as a prescriptive rather than a descriptive category. It serves to define and maintain strict borders between what is properly the domain of "traditional" knowledge and what is not. In its normativity, Guénon's esocentrism recalls Kocku von Stuckrad's useful conception of the esoteric as a totalizing discourse of 'absolute knowledge' predicated on a 'dialectic of the hidden and revealed',[7] echoing Georg Simmel's foundational work on the sociology of secrets.[8] This approach defines the esoteric not so much by its content as by its epistemological modality. Von Stuckrad writes,

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[4] Hanegraaff, 'Some Remarks', 14–15.

[5] Hanegraaff, 'Esotericism', 338.

[6] This term has been used previously by Hugh Urban (see his 'Syndrome of the Secret').

[7] Von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 10.

[8] I have in mind Simmel's notion that secret societies must always negotiate a dynamic interplay between the 'joy of confession' and the 'tension of reticence', which yields, in a sustainable secret society, a balance of 'retentive and communicative energies' (Simmel, 'The Sociology of Secrecy', 465–466).

> On the most general level of analysis, we can describe esotericism as the claim of higher knowledge. Important here is not only the *content* of these systems but the very fact that people *claim* a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history. What is claimed here is a vision of truth as a master key for answering all questions of humankind. Hence, relativism is the natural enemy of esotericism. The idea of higher knowledge is closely linked to a discourse of *secrecy*, albeit not because esoteric truths are restricted to an "inner circle" of specialists or initiates, but because the dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses.[9]

In this sense, the rhetoric of esotericism privileges secretive, "inner" dimensions of religious traditions over their "superficial" or exoteric dimensions, and is characterized by a preoccupation with secrets and secrecy. This is essential to understanding Guénon's construction of an implied audience privy to the closely guarded secrets of "tradition" opposed to the mass of readers who have no such access. Such rhetoric serves to delimit borders and demarcate specific audiences in esoteric writing.

Olav Hammer has discussed several modes of rhetoric in esoteric texts, which he calls 'cognitive strategies', all of which apply to Guénon. First, 'reduction' signifies several techniques of 'reducing the complexity, variety and contextuality of the traditions from which elements are taken'.[10] Secondly, 'pattern recognition' involves a 'search for parallels' and the 'construction of correspondences' between sometimes radically different bodies of knowledge.[11] This is especially important for understanding Guénon's perennialism. A third strategy is 'synonymization'. As Hammer explains, 'Whereas pattern recognition rhetorically erases differences between divergent elements of religious praxis and doctrines—myth A is essentially the same as myth B, ritual X is merely a version of ritual Y—synonymization wields its homogenizing influence over religious terminology'.[12] A fourth and final strategy, and most important for our purposes, is what Hammer calls 'source amnesia'. This is best described as

> the propensity to gloss over or be unaware of the fact that processes of reinterpretation have taken place. A reduction of complex doctrines to a

[9] Von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism', 88–89.
[10] Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 156–160.
[11] Ibid., 160–164.
[12] Ibid., 164.

> few building blocks, the extensive search for more or less spurious parallels or the application of various speculative hermeneutics to myths would hardly work if one were acutely aware of the Procrustean tactics used in each of these cases [...] In the case of religious bricolage, source amnesia typically takes place when a general term used in connection with an older tradition becomes associated with specific, modern reinterpretations.[13]

Thus, just as certain Jungian astrologers of the twentieth century, as Hammer notes, present their ideas as 'astrology' *as a whole* without acknowledging or recognizing the differences between the earlier understandings and their psychologizing interpretation, so Guénon cast his work as perennial tradition while obscuring, consciously or not, the distinctly modern imprint of his ideas.

1. *East and West*

I will now turn to an analysis of Guénon's polemical stance toward the modern West and attempt to place it in a wider social and cultural context. Throughout his work Guénon draws a stark contrast between East and West: the East is the refuge of all true knowledge, while the West has abandoned all truth. Western science and philosophy, and the materialism it engenders, are not true forms of knowledge, but merely aberrations from the one truth. Guénon constructs a polarity between East and West that resonates with the Orientalist tradition; the East is anti-modern, medieval, feudal, static, unified, and monolithic, while the West is modern, democratic, always changing, always divided. The difference between Guénon and the Orientalist tradition as usually understood, is that Guénon retains western stereotypes about the East but reverses their valuation; what is negative in Orientalist discourse becomes positive for Guénon. In other words, he champions the East through those very same stereotypes.

The primary text in Guénon's oeuvre that addresses these themes is his *East and West*, published in 1924. Here East and West form seamless and essentialized wholes in which civilizations are defined by the religions that predominate in each. Thus the 'Far East is represented essentially by the Chinese civilization, the Middle East (that is, India) by the Hindu, and the Near East by the Islamic'. The opposition between East and West is, moreover, 'more an opposition between two

[13] Ibid., 180.

mentalities than between two more or less clearly defined geographic entities'. Modernism is the 'Western mentality', while traditionalism is the 'Eastern mentality'.[14] 'The civilization of the West appears as a veritable anomaly' in the history of human societies, one defined above all by its ideologies of progress and scientism.[15] This is predicated on a materialist philosophy that the West has attempted to inflict upon eastern civilizations through its colonial enterprise. Yet the West, 'the youngest of all' the civilizations, has 'nothing to teach the East' and therefore its attempts to breach the polarity that defines the two as distinctly opposite is ultimately 'fruitless'.[16]

Guénon was highly critical of western colonialism. He writes:

> If they [the colonialists] merely took pleasure in affirming their imagined superiority, the illusion would only do harm to themselves; but their most terrible offence is their proselytizing fury: in them the spirit of conquest goes under the disguise of "moralist" pretexts, and it is in the name of "liberty" that they would force the whole world to imitate them! Most astonishing of all, they genuinely imagine in their infatuation that they enjoy a prestige among all other peoples; because they are dreaded as a brutal force is dreaded, they believe themselves to be admired; when a man is in danger of being crushed by an avalanche, does it follow that he is smitten with respect and admiration for it?[17]

He continues: 'What Westerners call progress is for nothing but change and instability; and the need for change, so characteristic of modern times, is in their eyes a mark of manifest inferiority; he who has reached a state of equilibrium no longer feels this need, just as he who has found no longer seeks'.[18] The East typifies this state of equilibrium in the basic doctrines of its traditions. The West, meanwhile, is defined by continuous change and instability.

Guénon's knowledge of the East was not unmediated; it was enabled by the Orientalist production of knowledge under the auspices of colonialism.[19] Guénon himself was never engaged in colonizing but was

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[14] Guénon, *Crisis*, 22–23.
[15] Guénon, *East and West*, 11.
[16] Ibid., 86–87.
[17] Ibid., 25.
[18] Ibid., 25–26.
[19] Despite being at this point somewhat outmoded, Edward Said's *Orientalism* remains the locus classicus for scholarly definitions of Orientalism as a practice: 'Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and [...] "the Occident"'. This sentence alone is enough to place Guénon squarely in this tradition. But Said continues: 'Thus a very large mass of writ-

nevertheless on the receiving end of colonial knowledge. In other words, his knowledge was a knowledge enabled by hegemony and domination, which left its imprint perhaps most palpably in the absence of a native "Oriental" voice in Guénon's oeuvre. Guénon speaks for but not with the Orient of his imagination, and speaks exclusively to the West; "Orientals" are not the implied audience of his oeuvre, if only because they already "know" everything he has to say. This fact alone is of fundamental importance for understanding his role as author. Guénon typically speaks of the Orient and Orientals simply as *ils*, the "They" whose politics, history, religiosity, morality, and above all metaphysics are exemplary in every respect and which the West must replicate in order to redeem itself. If his praise of the Orient is inseparable from his condemnation of the occident, nevertheless the former is rhetorically subordinate to the latter. In other words, Guénon's primary aim is to formulate a rigorous critique of the West.

A useful point of entry into Guénon's position vis-à-vis the Orient is provided by Richard Fox's notion of 'affirmative Orientalism'. Fox discusses ways in which 'Orientals' have appropriated western stereotypes of the Orient and used them for their own empowerment. As an example of this strategy, he discusses Gandhi's simultaneous appropriation and inversion of western visions of India through which he diffracted his entire project of cultural resistance against the West. Thus India's "passivity" became its "nonviolent resistance", its "otherworldliness" became its "spirituality", its lack of "individualism" became its "altruistic trusteeship", its lackadaisical attitude toward money and entrepreneurship became its "non-possessiveness", and so on.[20] While Gandhi was, strictly speaking, an "Oriental" who contested imperial hegemony through his own inversion of colonial terms of discourse, this maneuver owes much to Gandhi's familiarity with westerners who

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ers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind", destiny, and so on' (Said, *Orientalism*, 2–3). In addition, it is 'a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains' (ibid., 12).

[20] Fox, 'East of Said', 152.

disparaged the colonial enterprise for similar reasons, such as Leo Tolstoy, who had the most direct impact on this aspect of Gandhi's thought. Both 'employed these positive stereotypes against a modernized, aggressive, capitalist, materialistic, and carnivorous Europe'.[21]

Guénon engages in a similar reversal of valuations. Because the Orient, for instance, lacks 'practical' knowledge and its 'applications' in the 'experimental sciences', the Orientals, to their credit in his view, 'have never dreamed of adulterating the order of pure knowledge with anything of a material or sentimental nature'.[22] Perhaps no other passage distills the essence of Guénon's own "affirmative Orientalism" better than his comments in the *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* on Oriental immutability:

> Stability—one might even say immutability—is a quality which is quite commonly conceded to the Oriental civilizations, notably to the Chinese, but it is perhaps not quite so easy to agree over the assessing of this quality. Europeans, since the days when they began to believe in "progress" and in "evolution", that is to say since a little more than a century ago, profess to see a sign of inferiority in this absence of change, whereas, for our part, we look upon it as a balanced condition which Western civilization has failed to achieve.[23]

In this manner Guénon revaluates Oriental passivity and silence by assimilating it to a quietist concern for contemplation and lack of interest in the West and the vapid culture that he believes it has brought to Oriental regions of the globe. Rhetorically this comes across as either a reiteration of the theme of eastern silence/passivity in the face of western encroachment, or alternatively, as a covert rationalization of the lack of reference to actual Oriental authors and texts in Guénon's work. In other words, Guénon reassures the reader that this silence is explicable as a silence to which Orientals are already predisposed, a sentiment that the Traditionalist scholar of Buddhism, Marco Pallis, seconds in his introduction to Guénon's *Introduction*. Those Orientals 'who have not departed from their traditional norms' are 'still a majority though an unvocal one'.[24] Oriental silence is also misread by westerners as a tacit approval of the West's own intrusions. Meanwhile, Orientals

[21] Ibid.
[22] Guénon, *Introduction*, 41–42 and 286–287.
[23] Ibid., 32 (emphasis added).
[24] Ibid., 15.

have no impetus to reform the West, and therefore 'make no attempt to enlighten them, but on the contrary, taking up an attitude of somewhat disdainful politeness, they shut themselves up in a silence which vanity is never at a loss to interpret as a sign of approbation'.[25]

There is thus a certain precedent, a cultural niche, for Europeans like Guénon who critique the West from a standpoint within an appropriated notion of the East.[26] Ali Behdad levels a critique against Said through the appraisal of Western European travelers who represent this dissenting voice within Orientalism. Or if dissent is too strong a word, they are ambivalent, liminal, and in Behdad's own phrase, 'dispersed' voices, driven like Nerval by an insatiable *désir de l'Orient*. Isabelle Eberhardt, one of the earliest European converts to Islam, is one such voice. Born in Geneva in 1877 into a tumultuous family life, Eberhardt developed a passion for romantic, melancholic images of the Orient as conveyed through works such as Pierre Loti's, whose 'exotic depictions of the Orient as a desirable counterpart to decadent fin-de-siècle Europe offered Isabelle a locus of Orientalist reverie'.[27] Conceiving of her *vagabondage* as liberation from European cultural norms, Eberhardt spent most of her brief adult life meandering across North Africa, living with the local population, and recording her experiences. Speaking of Eberhardt's journals, Behdad continues:

> As a discourse of orientalist initiation, these texts are in a "parasitic" relation to the discourses of earlier orientalists such as Loti and Nerval. They recount the experience of a belated traveler's escapist fascination with a vision of the Orient as a locus of personal emancipation, a geographical alternative that can transcend the 'cruel decadence' of late nineteenth-century France. Eberhardt's Orient is a desirable Other, not an alien world, a place where she can avoid not only the "evils" of Europe's "social machine" but her own psychological conflicts.[28]

In short, there were among Guénon's contemporaries many Europeans who idealized (and essentialized) the East as a means of critiquing their own western origins. This counter-discourse assumes the form of 'a desired identification with the Orient that is the object of orientalist

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[25] Ibid., 21.

[26] Leela Gandhi has recently completed a thorough study of fin-de-siècle radicalism and anticolonial politics. See Gandhi, *Affective Communities*.

[27] Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 115.

[28] Ibid., 116.

knowledge'.[29] Guénon too fits within this rubric, critiquing the West through the very language enabled by Orientalist discourse.

2. *Western Esotericism and Tradition*

The second dimension of polemic that I wish to discuss is Guénon's polemic against occultism and "popular" esotericism on behalf of the one true "tradition". Early in his career Guénon rejected Theosophy and spiritualism, the practice of attempting communication with the dead that was reaching the height of its vogue during the late nineteenth century.[30] This is probably the first step in his conscious self-detachment from western thought and mores. His primary contention was that spiritualism and theosophy are tainted with western materialism. As early as 1909, Guénon had already declared in the journal *La Gnose* ('Gnosis'):

> The error of most of these so-called spiritualist doctrines is to have only transposed materialism onto another plane, and wishing to apply methods of ordinary science used to study the hylical world to the domain of spirit. These experimental methods will never comprehend anything beyond simple phenomena, upon which it is impossible to construct a metaphysical theory as such, for a universal principle cannot be inferred from particular facts. Moreover, the pretension to have acquired the knowledge of the spiritual world by material means is patently absurd, the principles of which we can discover only within ourselves, and not in externalities.[31]

Among his early full-length works, *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion* linked theosophy with modern experimental science and modernity as a whole, while *The Spiritist Fallacy* completely rejected the possibility of

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[29] Ibid., 119.

[30] Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*.

[31] 'La tort de la plupart de ces doctrines soi-disant spiritualistes, c'est de n'être que du matérialisme transposé sur un autre plan, et de vouloir appliquer au domaine de l'esprit les méthodes que la science ordinaire emploie pour étudier le monde hylique. Ces méthodes expérimentales ne feront jamais connaître autre chose que de simples phénomènes, sur lesquels il est impossible d'édifier une théorie métaphysique quelconque, car un principe universel ne peut pas s'inférer de faits particuliers. D'ailleurs, la prétention d'acquérir la connaissance du monde spirituel par des moyens matériels est évidemment absurde; cette connaissance, c'est en nous-même seulement que nous pouvons en trouver les principes, et non pas dans des sujets extérieurs' (Guénon, 'La Gnose et les écoles spiritualistes', *La Gnose*, December 1909; quoted in Paul Chacornac, *La vie simple*, 34).

communication with the dead within the cosmological structure revealed by tradition. Both of these works claim to reveal the dependence of theosophy and spiritualism on modern empiricism and scientific materialism. For instance, spiritualism is fundamentally only a 'transposition of materialist conceptions' of the world derived from Descartes' cleavage of the mind from the body. Thus the spiritualists must posit a specious 'perispirit' between spirit and body to act as an intermediary between the two.[32]

As Mircea Eliade—an avid reader of Guénon who to a certain degree translated Guénon's Traditionalist research on symbolism into a more academically palatable form—once pronounced,

> The most erudite and devastating critique of [...] "occult" groups was presented, not by a rationalist "outside" observer, but by an author from the inner circle, duly initiated into some of the secret orders and well acquainted with their occult doctrines; furthermore, that critique was directed, not from a skeptical or positivistic perspective, but from what he called "traditional esotericism". This learned and intransigent critic was René Guénon.[33]

It is thus clear that Guénon mounted a forceful critique of occult practices, but this raises a number of questions in regard to his polemic against the "esoteric establishment". For example, do his critiques annul his own debt to the esoteric milieu from which he emerged? Why, for example, does Guénon never address the authors from whom he derived his perennialist thought? Is he intentionally trying to elide the origin of his thought? And why does Guénon never mention the Hermeticist ancestry of the concept of a perennial philosophy?

In fact, the roots of Guénon's perennialism can be located in the European esoteric and intellectual tradition that he disavowed. As is well known, the earliest confirmed usage of the term can be traced to Agostino Steuco (1497–1548), a theologian and librarian of the Vatican. Steuco coined the term in his *De philosophia perenni sive veterum philosophorum cum theologia christiana consensu libri X* of 1540. Steuco bears an interesting resemblance to Guénon himself in his rejection of Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism and even seems to be a precursor to Guénon's antimodern politics.[34] Yet he also, like Guénon, posited an ineluctable

[32] Guénon, *Spiritist Fallacy*, 13–14.
[33] Eliade, *Occultism*, 51.
[34] Schmitt, 'Perennial Philosophy', 516.

decline of history—perhaps inevitable for any thinker who places the golden age of human civilization at the origins of time. According to Steuco, the truths revealed by God to our most distant forebears, to anticipate yet another central Guénonian theme, have been shrouded in mystery, 'completely forgotten or obscure and uncertain, like a story or myth'.[35] Perennialism, which locates the apex of human knowledge in the distant past rather than in an idealized future time, lends itself to a deeply conservative view of the world. In some perennialist thought this takes on a reactionary, polemical form.

However, it was Marsilio Ficino (1422–1499) who developed the concept in which perennialism took the form of a *prisca theologia* that extended back to Moses and culminated in Plato.[36] Wouter J. Hanegraaff has argued that perennialism is part and parcel of the self-identity of western esotericism from its origins to the present day, arguing that the 'beginnings of modern esotericism are generally located in the Florentine Platonic Academy founded by Cosimo de Medici in the second half of the 15th century and entrusted to the care of the young scholar Marsilio Ficino'.[37] Cosimo de Medici had bestowed on the young Ficino the task of translating the Platonic texts from the ancient world, along with the remaining texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, into Latin (only the *Asclepius* had been known previously). The latter's author, the mythic Hermes Trismegistus, was deemed a contemporary of Moses or quite possibly even older. In his *De christiana religione* and *Theologia platonica*, Ficino deduced that Christian scripture and Platonic thought ultimately emerged from the same fount of wisdom. In his view, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, and Orpheus all contributed to this ancient tradition.[38] In the fifteenth century, this idea congealed in the form of *philosophia perennis*, the doctrine that there is a single, universal, and essential truth that was revealed to humankind in ancient time and has since been scattered across numerous traditions but passed down piecemeal through esoteric, initiatic rites.

In 1614 Isaac Casaubon provided incontrovertible evidence that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not as ancient as had been believed until

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[35] Ibid., 517–518.

[36] The teachings of Moses and Plato were thought to derive from the same *Ur*-source, hence Numenius' (second century CE) well-known quip that Plato is simply a Greek-speaking Moses.

[37] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 388–389.

[38] Schmitt, 'Perennial Philosophy', 511.

that time. The antiquity of an author during this era, notes Antoine Faivre, was a prime criterion for the authenticity and value of a text.[39] Hence, when Casaubon (and others) demonstrated that the Hermetic texts were composed some time around the year 200 CE, there ensued a momentary loss of confidence in the Hermetic philosophy, and thus in the notion of perennial philosophy as well. Despite this assault on the textual foundations of the *philosophia perennis*, in France perennialism acquired a second renaissance, as it were. There perennialism was active in French Masonic circles in the late eighteenth century in a lodge known as 'Les Élus-Coëns' that operated between 1761 and 1781, among whose members was Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin. Papus (pseudonym of Gérard Encausse) in 1887 founded the Martinist order, naming it after Saint-Martin, suggesting that Saint-Martin was the true creator of the order and that he himself had merely 'revived' it.[40] This order, which Guénon entered in 1907,[41] was probably Guénon's primary source of perennialist ideas, according to Mark Sedgwick.[42]

In France there are also clear signs of a revitalization of perennialism in the thought of France's archconservative, Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821),[43] a figure whom Guénon both quoted and admired and who shared Guénon's polemic against modernity. 'The true religion', wrote de Maistre, 'was born on the day that [all] days were born [...] The vague conceptions [of the ancients] were no more than *the more or less feeble remains* of the primitive tradition'.[44] De Maistre has also played the role of the ultimate fount for the right and extreme right in France

[39] Faivre, 'Tradition', 1314. The first exposition of this idea, however, is Francis Yates' seminal work on Giordano Bruno, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*.

[40] Var, 'Martinism: First Period', 770.

[41] Rawlinson, *Book of Enlightened Masters*, 278–281.

[42] Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 40–41.

[43] Here I only have space to consider de Maistre's politics and views of history and their influence on Guénon, but there are other connections to the esotericist milieu of nineteenth-century France that are charted in depth by Emile Dermenghem in his *Joseph de Maistre mystique*. See especially the chapters titled 'Joseph de Maistre et l'Illuminisme' and 'L'Esotérisme'. The chapter on 'Le Christianisme et la Tradition universelle' explores de Maistre's views of the '*analogies frappantes*' between Christianity and other faiths, but he seems to stop far short of perennialism, and Christianity for him was always '*la Religion* par excellence, la religion universelle et, au fond, unique de l'Humanité' (251), a point of obvious divergence with Guénon. A more general (and controversial) account of Joseph de Maistre's philosophy and worldview is available in the final chapter of Isaiah Berlin's *Freedom and its Betrayal*, which portrays de Maistre as a severe anti-rationalist who, contrary to his Enlightenment forebears, placed humanity firmly within a web of nature based entirely on violence and self-interest.

[44] Quoted in Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 41 (emphasis in the original).

since the end of the Revolution. Like him, Guénon despised revolution in all its forms. Revolution is typical of western civilization, where action is valued over contemplation, and in the modern West, where there is an incessant leveling of human society and a hatred of natural hierarchies. Revolutionary action also tends to result in its opposite, as democracy degenerates into tyranny. It can only be a "perversion", an inversion of what it intended. Thus one author adduces de Maistre as a central example of what he calls the "perversity thesis" in his typology of different modes of reactionary polemic.[45]

In 1796 de Maistre published his magnum opus, *Considerations on France*, arguably the *locus classicus* of post-Revolutionary conservatism in France. Foreshadowing Guénon, de Maistre believed that the Protestant Reformation had unleashed nefarious forces of individualism that culminated in the French Revolution. De Maistre aspired not merely to resist the revolution but to reverse it entirely with his notion of "counter revolution": 'that which we call the "counter revolution" will not at all be a "counter revolution" as such, but "contrary to the Revolution"'.[46] Guénon himself insisted that the French Revolution was 'equivalent to a rejection of all tradition'.[47] Thus the impetus of the Protestant Reformation culminated in an 'absolute individualism'.[48]

In his polemic against western society, Guénon envisioned theocracy as the ideal form of government. Likewise, the figure at the apex of de Maistre's hierarchy is a person who 'unified earthly and spiritual power',[49] who acts in the role of both 'Pope and Executioner', the central theme of Guénon's own *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*. Guénon was keenly aware of the apocalyptic undertones of de Maistre's thought, and even ended his *King of the World* with

> that phrase of Joseph de Maistre, which is more true today than it was a century ago: 'We must stand ready for an immense event within the

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[45] Hirschmann, *Rhetoric of Reaction*, 17–19.

[46] '[…] ce qu'on appelle *contre-révolution*, ne sera point une *révolution contraire*, mais le *contraire de la révolution*' (de Maistre, *Considérations*, 157; quoted in Freund, *La décadence*, 203). Freund's monumental work on the history of decadence as a concept traces the idea of a *déclin de l'occident* from the counter-revolutionaries (de Maistre, de Bonald, Franz von Baader), through Jacob Burckhardt and Oswald Spengler, and finally ending with Gustave le Bon, Guénon, Albert Schweitzer, Ortega y Gasset, H. de Man, and E. M. Cioran.

[47] Guénon, *Introduction*, 37.

[48] 'Le protestantisme politique pousse jusqu'à l'individualisme absolu', quoted in Swart, *Sense of Decadence*, 50.

[49] Davies, *Extreme Right in France*, 31.

> divine order, towards which we are moving with a quickened pace that must surprise all those who heed it. Formidable oracles have already announced that the times have arrived'.[50]

The thrust of Guénon's reactionary polemic against the modern West and against democracy has precedents in another luminary among the French *théocrates*, Louis de Bonald,[51] who believed that the proper government must defer to a higher spiritual authority and, naturally, expressed a strong sense of nostalgia for the medieval papacy.[52]

Some six decades before the birth of Guénon, in 1821, a disciple of the theocrats, Félicité de Lamennais, opined in a letter to de Maistre, 'It seems to me that all are preparing for the great and final catastrophe'.[53] For Guénon, likewise, the entire modern epoch amounts to a profound disaster, a cosmic crisis. Guénon explains the sense of use of the word "crisis" as such:

> [w]hen it is said that the modern world is in the throes of a crisis, this is usually taken to mean that it has reached a critical phase, or that a more or less complete transformation is imminent, and that a change of direction must soon ensue—whether voluntarily or not, whether suddenly or gradually, whether catastrophic or otherwise, remains to be seen.[54]

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[50] '[…] cette phrase de Joseph de Maistre, qui est encore plus vraie aujourd'hui qu'il y a un siècle: "Il faut nous tenir prêts pour un événement immense dans l'ordre divin, vers lequel nous marchons avec une vitesse accélérée qui doit frapper tous les observateurs. Des oracles redoutables annoncent déjà que les temps sont arrives"' (Guénon, *Roi du Monde*, 136). Guénon in fact ends a short essay on de Maistre and Freemasonry with the same quotation. Nevertheless, he criticizes de Maistre's conceptions of Freemasonry as a historical institution and even suggests his initiatic credentials are "far from being perfect" (*loin d'être parfaite*). See Guénon, "Un Projet de Joseph de Maistre".

[51] Louis Gabriel Amboise Vicomte de Bonald (1754–1840) was a French politician and author of the reactionary political treatise *Theorie du pouvoir politique et religieux*, See Klinck, *The French Counterrevolutionary Theorist Louis de Bonald*.

[52] For Guénon, similarly, the middle ages were the 'only period when Western civilization enjoyed a truly intellectual development' (*Introduction*, 122). Guénon believed that Islam, compared to Catholicism, had changed little since the middle ages and thus offered a path toward "traditional" knowledge far less tainted by modernity. This "medievalizing" of Islam explains in part why he chose that religion as an alternative to what he perceived as a moribund Catholicism. Though there is no room to do so here, a more in depth study of Guénon's medievalism could frame it in terms of the widespread cultural nostalgia for the Middle Ages in European art and literature, ranging from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Arts and Crafts movement. An example of such nostalgia from Guénon's era in France can be found in Nikolai Berdiaev's *Un Nouveau Moyen Âge: refléxions sur les destinées de la Russie et l'Europe* (Paris: Plon, 1927). I am grateful to Jean-Pierre Brach for pointing out this historical context.

[53] 'Il me semble, que tout se prepare pour la grande et dernière catastrophe'; quoted in Swart, *Sense of Decadence*, 51.

[54] Guénon, *Crisis*, 2.

One historian observes how the older right of post-Revolutionary France, the counterrevolutionary right, gradually gave way to a more nationalistic, aggressive, and overtly "ideological" new right after the disastrous defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871.[55] The dominant public personality of the time, General Georges Boulanger (1837–1891), propelled the right toward a more populist right-wing politics consumed with revenge against Prussia. *Le boulangisme* found its most articulate propagandist in the novelist, poet and politician Maurice Barrès. Barrès was one of the twelve charter members of the *Suprême Conseil de L'Ordre Martiniste*, along with other occultist luminaries, Gerard Encausse (Papus), Stanislas de Guaïta, and Joséphin Péladan.[56]

A final point concerns the relation between Guénon's perennialism and theosophy. During the late nineteenth century, with the translation of numerous Hindu texts, ideas of perennial philosophy were grafted onto Vedic philosophy to produce "Vedanta-Perennialism".[57] Foremost among Guénon's antecedents were the founders of the Theosophical Society, Colonel Henry Olcott and Madame Helena Blavatsky. The co-founder of the movement, Olcott, set out to discover the 'primeval source of all religion, the books of Hermes and the Vedas'.[58] Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* claimed to comprehend "ancient wisdom" that was lost to the West with the spread of Christianity and the rise of science—knowledge that had remained intact in various locations of the Orient, principally Egypt, India, and Tibet.[59]

Antoine Faivre credits the Theosophical Society for reviving the western esoteric interest in the 'Oriental' East and believes that theosophy's rendering of perennial philosophy in Oriental terms presages the turn to Eastern "tradition" in Guénon's own work.[60] According to Faivre, the

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[55] Jenkins, *Nationalism*, 87–88.
[56] Méroz, *René Guénon*, 27.
[57] Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 41.
[58] Quoted in Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 29.
[59] Dubey, *Esotericism and Orientalism*, 36.
[60] I should stress, therefore, that theosophy is largely responsible for revitalizing an interest in the Orient among *modern* western esoteric circles. In fact, notions of an exoticized Orient of magic and mystique are much older than the modern era; one can arguably see glimpses of this in its incipient forms in works as old as Aeschylus' *Persians*. There is a long history of Byzantine Orientalism that I cannot address here, but a crucial link between that history and the modern western history of perennialism beginning with Ficino is Georges Gemistos Plethon, a Byzantine whose edition of the

notion of tradition and Traditionalism first emerges out of Blavatsky's theosophy and is then appropriated by Guénon for his own usage some time later.[61] Despite his overt distaste for the Theosophical Society, then, there are many striking similarities between Blavatsky and Guénon. Blavatsky and Guénon, for example, share a similar polemical stance against their opponents, in which they marshal evidence for their arguments from Orientalist research but also claim to have access to secret knowledge unavailable to non-initiates, i.e. the Orientalists in question.[62] Like Guénon, Blavatsky also championed traditional distinctions of caste and hierarchy.[63] In summary, several currents of western esoteric thought—*philosophia perennis*, reactionary esoteric circles in *belle époque* France, and the turn to the East in the Theosophical Society—inform and enable Guénon's own unique intellectual synthesis.

3. *Traditionalism and the Academy*

The third and final dimension of polemic in the work of Guénon that I will explore is his polemic against the modern study of religion, which he believes is an assault against religion itself. Guénon's relationship to the academic study of religion is an ambivalent one: on the one hand, he is highly critical of the discipline, while on the other hand his thinking about "religion" in many ways presupposes the construction of religion as an academic category and the modern discipline of *Religionswissenschaft*. His efforts, conscious or not, to disguise his

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Chaldean Oracles, among other texts, was transmitted to Ficino. See Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon*. Michael Stausberg has explored in great depth the roles that Plethon and others played in developing medieval images of the Orient through interpretations of Zarathustra/Zoroaster; see his *Faszination Zarathushtra*.

[61] Faivre, 'Tradition', 1314. Faivre writes, 'The word "Tradition" […] emerges definitively at the end of the nineteenth century largely under the influence of the Theosophical Society […] to designate a *philosophia perennis* encompassing the entire spiritual universe of humanity. Believing himself to have seen in the writings of its founder, and in those of her disciples, a syncretism devoid of rigor, René Guénon undertook in the 1920s the work of reforming esotericism, and placed it under the sign of Tradition' ('Le mot Tradition […] s'impose définitivement à la fin du XIXème siècle généralement sous l'influence de la Societé théosophique […] pour désigner une *philosophia perennis* élargie aux dimensions de tout l'univers spirituel de l'humanité. Ayant cru voir dans les écrits de cette fondatrice, et dans ceux de ses disciples, un syncrétisme dépourvu de rigueur, René Guénon entreprit dans les années 1920 une oeuvre de réformation de l'ésotérisme, et il la plaça sous le signe de la Tradition').

[62] Dubey, *Esotericism and Orientalism*, 44–45.

[63] Ibid., 55 and 55 note 34.

indebtedness to this current of thought beneath his invectives against it, yield valuable insights into the psychology of religious polemic.

Guénon began his intellectual career in the French academy, where he showed early signs of promise. In 1917 Guénon was admitted as a candidate for the *concours d'agrégation* in philosophy at the Sorbonne, but he failed the oral component of the examination and his thesis was subsequently rejected by the Sanskritist Sylvain Lévi on the grounds that he failed to approach his subject, the Vedanta, from a suitably historicist point of view.[64] Had he succeeded in both, which he came close to accomplishing, he would have become a *docteur de l'Université de Paris*.[65] Nevertheless, his thesis research was published later, in 1921, as *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* under the encouragement of the neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain. In light of his rejection by the French academy, it is no wonder that he made his opposition to the academic study of religion abundantly clear throughout his later work.

In *Perspectives on Initiation*, Guénon writes,

> The "science of religions" affirms its "profane" character, in the worst sense of the word, by asserting in principle that only someone outside all religions and so having an altogether external understanding of them [...] is qualified to consider religion "scientifically". The truth is that under the pretext of disinterested knowledge there hides a clearly anti-traditional motive, a "criticism" that for its promoters, and perhaps less consciously for their followers, is meant to destroy all tradition, and of which the prejudice is to see in tradition only a collection of psychological, social or other purely human facts.[66]

Elsewhere, Guénon avers that 'the "science of religions" such as is taught in the universities has in reality never been anything else but an instrument of war directed against religion and, more generally, against everything that may still subsist of the traditional spirit'.[67]

However, in his studies of religious myth and symbol, Guénon is doing something that fits under the rubric of *comparative religions*. When he compares Meister Eckhart and Ibn ʿArabi, or when he suggests a homology between symbols of spiritual authority in ancient Indian, Egyptian, and Celtic traditions, he is engaging in comparative religions.

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[64] Sedgwick, 'How Traditional are the Traditionalists?', 81.
[65] Personal correspondence with Jean-Pierre Brach.
[66] Guénon, *Perspectives*, 37–38.
[67] Guénon, *Science of Sacred Symbols*, 5.

Many of his closest disciples appropriated his ahistorical, symbolic, and mythic readings of world religions. While these readings diverged in many ways from the earlier, philologically inclined *Religionswissenschaft* that grew out of the seminal research of F. Max Müller, C. P. Tiele and others, Guénonian comparativism impacted the subsequent emergence of phenomenology as an alternative way of reading religious history in the mid-twentieth century.[68] Guénon's relation to comparative religions, at the same time dependent on and hostile toward it, places him squarely in the modern era and arguably makes him truly part of the modern history of religions—this despite his antipathy to modernity—and accentuates Guénon's deep ambivalence toward his own era and sources of thought.[69]

The very act of juxtaposing religions and suggesting their core equivalence yields the notion of "religion" in the abstract. In this sense, Guénon's intellectual debt is to the scholars of "world religions" before him who developed this notion in their works. As Peter Harrison notes,

> the very methods of the embryonic science of religion determined to a large extent what "religion" was to be [...] Inquiry into the religion of a people became a matter of asking what was believed, and if it was true. The emergence of the idea of religion thus entailed tests of religious truth, theories of religion, comparisons of "religions", in short, a whole set of rules which governed the way the nascent concept was to be deployed.[70]

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[68] Tomoko Masuzawa is correct to observe in a review of Steven Wasserstrom's *Religion after Religion* that one can discern two, often conflicting narratives about the rise of the academic study of religion in the twentieth century, the first linking it to the legacy of *Religionswissenschaft* as practiced by Müller, Tiele, P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, and others, the second to the legacy of Eranos and the work of the three main scholars under Wasserstrom's scrutiny, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, and Gershom Scholem. Masuzawa observes that *Religion after Religion* finds 'an important point of origin—if not to say *the* origin—of the History of Religions in a location other than those familiar sites of the nineteenth-century neosciences' ('Reflections on the Charmed Circle', 431). As Wasserstrom notes, the traces of Guénon's influence are evident in the work of Eliade, the one figure among the Eranos Three, to borrow Masuzawa's phrase, who had the most impact on the study of religion and its popular reception outside of academia.

[69] By 'modern' here I intend to connote primarily a span of time: the study of "religion" and religions as such began (at the latest) in the seventeenth century, the early stages of the era that historians often place under the rubric of modernity.

[70] Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 2–3.

The deceptively simple notion of "religion" has a complex genealogy, and is informed throughout its history by the Christian West, the context in which it arose.[71] As early as the third century, the Christian writer Lactantius argued with Cicero over the etymology of the word *religio*. The famous orator had traced its meaning to *relegere*, to retrace or reread. In this sense, as Cicero explained, religion entails tracing out the ritual obligations one owes to the gods and to one's ancestors through time, and by extension, maintaining proper piety. It is a definition of religion limited in scope to local traditions, not a generalized, generic definition that encompasses creed or belief.[72] Lactantius, on the other hand, realized that his religion clearly went beyond these traditional, pious obligations and thus argued that *religio* actually derives from *religare*, to link or bind. Religion, he goes on to explain, is then a binding obligation between the individual and the one true God.[73] It also introduces a *normative* element into the concept of religion: the disparate practices of honoring the gods that may vary from one city to the next are now eclipsed by a category that defines religion as obligation to *the* God and thus marginalizes the practices that Cicero's definition connoted.

This is relevant for our purposes here because Guénon himself defines religion using Lactantius' terminology: 'Religion, according to its verbal derivation, is "that which binds"', and then asks, 'but is this to be taken in the sense of something that binds man to a superior principle, or something that binds men to one another?'[74] The answer to this query, he adds, is that the history of western religion has embraced the former to the neglect of the latter. Indeed, as he spells out in his *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, Guénon insisted that the history of the West is in large part an ineluctable un-tying of the social bonds inherent in a truly "traditional" (that is, for him, a thoroughly religious) society. Guénon's own understanding of religion is closely linked to one at the root of Western Christianity. That this is indeed a local, Christian definition became apparent when the intercultural contacts of the early modern era compelled Christian theologians and philosophers to discuss the nature of non-Christian "others".

But discourses on "religion" as such really began in the modern era. Following on the fifteenth and sixteenth century ideas of perennial

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[71] Asad, *Genealogies*.
[72] Balagangadhara, *'The Heathen in His Blindness'*, 242.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Guénon, *Introduction*, 92.

religion discussed previously, in the seventeenth century the separation of "innate religion" and "the religions" became even more nuanced. In the work of the Cambridge Platonists, to take the most striking example of this process, the mere fact of religious pluralism is resolved by reference to disparate modes of knowing the divine, some certainly better than others. Thus the pagan religions of the world become, in the words of Ralph Cudworth, probably the pre-eminent member of this school of thought, 'nothing else but so many several names and notions of that one Numen, divine force and power, which runs through the whole world, multiformly displaying itself therein'. Hence truths 'are not multiplied by the Diversity of Minds that apprehend them, because they are all but Ectypal Participations of one and the same Original or Archetypal Mind and Truth'.[75]

The reification of "religion" as internal belief in a propositional truth claim reached a new height in the seventeenth century with the publication in 1624 of Lord Herbert of Cherbury's (1583–1648) *De veritate* and his 'five common notions' that all religions purportedly share. They are: (1) that there is a supreme God, (2) that God is to be worshipped, (3) that virtue and piety are the most important elements of religious practice, (4) that the faithful must repent their misdeeds, and (5) that there is a reward or punishment in the afterlife. Herbert foreshadows the subjective, inward turn of religious epistemology present in Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolf Otto, and establishes the foundations for the "natural history" of religions by locating religious experience in the mind's faculties.[76]

As Basil Willey has observed, connecting this narrative to the history of Europe's commerce with the East,

> Exploration and commerce had widened the horizon, and in many writers of the century one can see that the religions of the East, however imperfectly known, were beginning to press upon the European consciousness. It was a pioneer-interest in these religions, together with the customary preoccupation of Renaissance scholars with the mythologies of classical antiquity, which led Lord Herbert to seek a common denominator for all religions, and thus to provide, as he hoped, the much-needed eirenicon for seventeenth-century disputes [...] Herbert discovers the principle of certainty in the '*natural instinct*', the '*common notions*' of mankind.[77]

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[75] Both are quoted in Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 41.
[76] Ibid., 67–70.
[77] Willey, *Seventeenth Century Background*, 123.

This "natural religion" especially in its deist manifestation, was conceived as the spiritual disposition that all human beings shared, *mutatis mutandis*. All purportedly exhibit fundamental beliefs in a supreme being, forms of worship and ethical codes.[78] By the late eighteenth century, this notion had engendered a fully reified "religion" as seen in the writings, for example, of Kant:

> There may certainly be different historical *confessions*, although these have nothing to do with religion itself but only with changes in the means used to further religion, and are thus the province of historical research. And there may be just as many religious *books* (the Zend-Avesta, the Vedas, the Koran, etc.). But there can only be *one religion* which is valid for all men and at all times. Thus the different confessions can scarcely be more than the vehicles of religion; these are fortuitous, and may vary with differences in time or place.[79]

Guénon's thought also has important precedents in the discourse on "universal monotheism" in the early Enlightenment. In each of the eastern "traditions" that he examines, the principle of unity and oneness always supersedes all else, and becomes the defining feature of his metaphysical system, which is universal and ubiquitous. Before Guénon, however, Cudworth had already advanced an influential concept of "universal monotheism" in his magisterial series of tomes, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe.*[80] Guénon, in his allegiance to a "monotheized" interpretation of the Vedanta that gained widespread currency during the later nineteenth century, echoes some of the Orientalist imaginings of a "universal monotheism": '*Every genuinely traditional doctrine is then in reality monotheistic*, or, to be more accurate, it is a "doctrine of unity" or rather of "non-duality", becoming monotheistic when it has to be translated into the religious mode'.[81]

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the translation of the Vedas and Brahmanic works that impacted how Guénon saw the Orient. Charles Wilkins published the first English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in 1785. Meanwhile, William Jones issued a translation of *Shakuntala* in 1789 and *The Laws of Manu* in 1794, and in 1816 Franz Bopp's comparative grammar of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Persian,

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[78] See Byrne, *Natural Religion*, for a good overview of this idea, especially chapter 3.
[79] Kant, *Political Writings*, 114, quoted in Asad, *Genealogies*, 42.
[80] Pailin, *Attitudes*, 23.
[81] Guénon, *Introduction*, 308.

and Germanic languages first appeared.[82] G. W. Trompf describes a monumental shift during this era, in which India came to eclipse Israel and Greece within the European macrohistorical imagination.[83] Trompf suggests that this realignment in the imagination of deep historical time had a profound effect on western esotericism at the turn of the last century, in particular prompting Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, and René Guénon to envision India as the most ancient root of history. Guénon derived his interpretation of *Manvantara*, or the periodizations of Hindu cosmological time that are essential to his entire view of historical process, from French translations of Puranic texts, especially Emile Burnouf's multi-volume French translation titled *Le Bhagavata Purana*, published in Paris from 1840 to 1847, in particular Book XI.[84] In a lecture of 1832, Burnouf had already exclaimed, 'It is more than India, gentlemen, it is a page from the origins of the world, from the primitive history of the human species, that we shall attempt to decipher together'.[85]

The translation of Indian sacred texts permitted a significant revisioning of the historical and cosmological time to which Guénon's work is indebted. The origins of the comparative study of religion grew out of the perennialist milieu discussed previously and shared many of the same concerns; the great extension of imagined historical time beyond the previous limits demarcated by biblical time is a kind of corollary to perennialism on the level of historiography.

In summary, each of these features in the genealogy of comparative religions—its reliance on a conception of "religion" inherited from Renaissance perennialism and Enlightenment-era imaginings of a common faith for mankind, its text and scripture-centered methodology, its focus on world-historical religious traditions—informs the comparative work of Guénon.

I have argued here that Guénon's work is characteristically modern in several respects. This does not mean that he was a modern*ist*. Marshall Berman articulated the difference between modern and modernist in his influential study, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, in the following terms:

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[82] Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 21.
[83] Trompf, 'Macrohistory', 270.
[84] Ibid., 292.
[85] Quoted in Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 24.

> to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.[86]

In his personal experience of the maelstrom of the modern world, Guénon took refuge in his scholarship. He used his scholarship not only to critique modernity but also to agitate against it. Guénon may, finally, be best understood as an exemplar of the essentialist impulse that values the civilizational at the expense of the local, generality over complexity, and similarity over difference.

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[86] Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 345–346.

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CONTESTED DIVINERS: VERBAL BATTLES BETWEEN DOWSERS AND SKEPTICS

Olav Hammer

1. *Olof Palme and the Dowsers*

The murder of Sweden's Prime Minister Olof Palme on 28 February 1986 triggered the most extensive police investigation in Swedish history. The main witness was Olof Palme's wife Lisbeth. Several other people who had been standing or walking in the vicinity of the scene of the crime were also questioned. The statements by these witnesses described the killer as an athletically built middle-aged man. After several years of more or less fruitless research, the main suspect, a substance abuser and petty criminal by the name of Christer Petterson, was acquitted due to inconclusive evidence and procedural errors committed during the investigation. At his death in 2004, there still remained circumstantial indications that Petterson may have been the perpetrator, but the case against him was effectively closed. At the time of writing, two decades after the fatal shot in Stockholm, the assassination remains unsolved. Time passes, but for some people at least, Palme's death remains a national trauma.

This is the kind of scenario which typically leads itself to conspiracy theories, alternative solutions to the mystery.[1] Several individuals have, depending on one's perspective, become famous or infamous as private investigators. Among the theories that have circulated are claims that the assassination was carried out by right-wing extremists, Kurdish terrorists, CIA agents, or the South African secret police.

Among the more unusual episodes in the history of the Palme murder investigations is the incident reported in two issues of the journal of the Swedish Dowsers' Society, *Slagrutan* ('The Divining Rod').[2] In these articles, written by a presumably pseudonymous Nils Holgerson, we learn of the following chain of events. In the fall of 1996, a dowser from Southern Sweden concentrated on two photographs: one of Olof

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[1] A number of such conspiracy theories are discussed in Freyermuth, *Verschwörungstheorien*.

[2] *Slagrutan* 17/2000, 9–11 and 23/2001, 6–7, at www.slagruta.org/IMG/nr17.pdf and www.slagruta.org/IMG/nr23.pdf (both accessed 26 August 2006).

Palme and one of a revolver of the type used in the murder. Several of his colleagues, standing at the site of the killing on Sveavägen in Stockholm, used dowsing instruments to pick up a so-called psi track, allegedly a paranormal energy line generated by the effort of concentrating on the two images. The psi track led them on a long and winding road through Stockholm, to a house in a residential area in one of the southern districts of the city, approximately 6 km (4 miles) from the site of the crime. The dowsers cautiously refrained from knocking on the door, but duly noted the address and proceeded to check the public records in order to find out who resided there. To their astonishment, the person living at that address was a woman with a professional background and unremarkable family circumstances. The dowsers reported their findings to the police, who appear to have filed away this suggestion from the general public, together with all other information that they in all probability deemed useless.

How did Nils Holgerson comment on the outcome of the paranormal investigation? He and the other dowsers had contacted several psychics in order to corroborate their suspicion. When the psychics were shown a passport-size photograph of the woman, they confirmed that she was indeed involved. A woman, Holgerson reasoned, could easily disguise herself as a man, even as an athletically built male. The lumbering gait of the assassin, which was specifically commented upon by several witnesses, could be explained if the woman was jogging up to her victim. The fact that she moved from Stockholm within a few months after being tracked down by the dowsers is mentioned in the article as an incriminating piece of circumstantial evidence. The apparent lack of interest evinced by the police is understood as the result of a vast conspiracy. In the terminology used in Nils Holgerson's article, they 'put a lid on' and 'kept secret' the information that they were given (rather than, say, 'ignored' it). The secretiveness of the police is attributed to the hypothesis that the woman in question was protected by powerful people high up in the social hierarchy.

For all its apparent exoticism, the Palme story illustrates several facets of contemporary dowsing. At a first glance, one is struck by the similarities between the practices described by Nils Holgerson, and the activities of the many ritual diviners recorded in anthropological literature. The use of ritual means in order to identify the perpetrators of crimes and uncover the causes of social crises is not least familiar from various African localities. The presupposition underlying the search for Olof Palme's assassin—that there are invisible forces operating in

the world, accessible only to those skilled in an arcane art—is a topos equally familiar from various ethnographic contexts. Readers might come away with the feeling that they could just as well have been accompanying Evans-Pritchard on one of his forays into witchcraft among the Azande, or read Victor Turner describing his Ndembu friend, the diviner Muchona.[3]

Nevertheless, there are details in the course of events recorded in the article that seem peripheral to the main plot of Nils Holgerson's story, but which reveal that the author lives in a very different social context and has a different agenda than the Azande or Ndembu diviner. In particular, although dowsing has a recorded history that stretches back to the middle of the sixteenth century, the Palme dowsers operated as innovators.[4] Dowsing has no single, culturally well-defined form or application, but appears in a myriad of malleable shapes. It is familiar to most people in the modern West as a method of locating underground water, performed by rural specialists using a Y-shaped twig. Indeed, in American English dowsing is at times also referred to as "water witching". However, dowsing has the most diverse applications and can be performed with a variety of instruments. Dowsers look for metal ore, they search for deposits of oil and natural gas, and attempt to locate lost or hidden objects, including archeological finds. They identify criminals and detect subtle energies that they postulate exist in the ground. They try to find avalanche victims buried under masses of snow. Besides twigs, they use metal or plastic rods bent in L-shape, as well as pendulums. Some dowsers claim to be so sensitive that they can do without any instruments at all, relying on their hands and bodily sensations.[5] Others suggest that they do not even need to be physically present in the terrain in order to find water, lost objects, or people, but can perform dowsing on a map. Individual diviners can pick, combine and revise such practices at will. Although the Palme dowsers were certainly steeped in this pluralistic and "alternative" culture, they were clearly improvising the particulars of their trade as they went along.

Similarly, there is no overall consensus among dowsers as to understanding the import of their practice. Dowsing can by some of its

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[3] Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft*; Turner, 'Muchona'.

[4] A brief historical sketch will be presented later in this paper.

[5] Dowsing here overlaps with spiritual geomancy represented e.g. by Marco Pogačnik; see de Pater 2005.

practitioners be understood as an entirely instrumental technique. Traditional, rural dowsers are particularly prone to viewing dowsing as simply a practical activity, with little or no metaphysical overtones. Others, like the Palme dowsers, attempt to embed dowsing in a broader and more articulate world-view. It is with these modern, predominantly urban, dowsers that the present paper is concerned.[6]

Those who do articulate theories underpinning their practice have a range of culturally available discourses at their disposal. There are, on the one hand, scientific or para-scientific ways of legitimating one's craft. On the other, dowsing can be combined with religious world-views, which resonate with New Age or occultist interests. Many dowsers, such as Nils Holgerson, draw on both. The rational-instrumental attitude to dowsing is implicit in Holgerson's obvious puzzlement at the fact that the police ignored the evidence uncovered by the dowsers. At one point in his article, the author's rationalism is made explicit by a seemingly irrelevant aside addressed at various skeptics, who purportedly reject dowsing out of sheer ignorance. Holgerson assures his readers that dowsing is ultimately explainable in scientific terms, albeit a science vastly different from the mainstream version of science supported by blinkered materialists. The author explains:

> It should be stressed that a Y-shaped branch used as a dowsing rod has no inherent magical power. The movements of the rod via the hands are merely the physically measurable reflections of the dowser's subconscious. The central question of the research on dowsing is the conditions for and nature of these subconscious reactions. Skeptics, who regard this research with some measure of contempt, may say whatever they wish.[7]

There is thus a distinct tension in Holgerson's article between on the one hand a projected image of science, instrumentality, and adherence to widely shared norms of rationality, and on the other a set of presuppositions that may strike outsiders to the dowsing milieu as highly

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[6] For the distinction between rural and urban dowsers, see Barrett & Vogt, 'Urban American Dowser', who note that there at the time of their survey (late 1960s) was basically no overlap between the two groups.

[7] 'Det tål upprepas att en som slagruta använd klyka inte besitter någon egen inneboende magisk kraft. Klykans rörelser via händerna är endast en i det fysiska mätbar återspegling av reaktioner från slagrutepersonens undermedvetna. Det är betingelserna för dessa omedvetna reaktioner och deras natur som intar en central plats i forskningen kring slagrutefenomenet. Skeptiker, som betraktar denna forskning med visst förakt, må säga vad de vill' (*Slagrutan* 17/2000, 10, at http://www.slagruta.org/IMG/nr17.pdf [accessed 26 August 2006]).

unconventional. The suggestion that past events leave invisible traces, recoverable by a kind of *Geheimwissenschaft*, is far removed from mainstream science. It would, however, be instantly familiar to spiritualists as psychometry, and to some occultists as the Akashic records. Conversations with dowsers and a perusal of the dowsing literature show that Nils Holgerson is, in this respect, quite typical of how dowsing supports what are, from the majority perspective, highly unconventional beliefs. One dowser explained in conversation with the present author that large rocks in the landscape, formations that are explained by conventional science as vestiges from the last glacial period, had in fact been dropped on the ground by a prehistoric race of giants, in order to block the effect of noxious "earth energies". Others have expressed the conviction that their instruments will register the size and shape of the human aura, some even suggesting that they can detect the auras of normally invisible beings, e.g. various nature spirits. Yet others propose that practicing dowsing sharpens one's intuitions and opens up paranormal skills such as clairvoyance.

Seemingly incontrovertible personal experience convinces dowsers of the efficacy of their method and of the results that they obtain. Why do some people stubbornly reject dowsing? Dowsers will in conversations, on the Internet, and in printed literature routinely accuse skeptics of being grossly prejudiced. Often, such accusations appear incidental, as a sentence or two added to a narrative relating the appeal and successes of the technique. Few dowsers go to any lengths in order to systematically support the validity of their practices. Those who do, generally share Nils Holgerson's contention: dowsing is redescribed as a science. A minority of academics with a personal interest in this area and the professional prestige necessary to present dowsing in scientific terminology become prominent writers of this particular genre of pro-dowsing literature. Some texts describe specific cases that the author has carried out, adducing an explanation phrased in terms that one associates with mainstream sciences such as physics. Others survey previous studies, arguing that the sheer number of successful applications of dowsing lends credibility to the practice, and that the reactions of more skeptical scientists are due to ignorance or bad faith. A few references to such texts, all taken from a short span of time and one single country, can serve as *exempla* of a quite sizeable literature.

2. *Apologetics*

Bo Nordell holds a position as associate professor at the Department of Water Resources Engineering at Luleå University of Technology. In 1988 he published a paper with the bold title 'The Dowsing Reaction Originates from Piezo Electric Effect in Bone'.[8] The paper begins with the premise *that* dowsing works, and attempts to formulate a hypothesis that might explain *how* it works. Nordell argues that the dowsing rod functions as an amplifier of certain physiological reactions in the human body. When a dowser attempts to find water, his body reacts to small shifts in the electromagnetic field, fluctuations that arise when water flows. The human skeleton has piezoelectric properties. This means that mechanical deformations give rise to electrical currents and conversely, that an alternating current will cause a mechanical reaction. The piezoelectric effect itself is well-known and entirely uncontroversial. Quartz watches, for instance, are dependent on the piezoelectric property of certain crystals, which vibrate at a regular frequency when subjected to an electrical current. Nordell's hypothesis is that the shifts in electromagnetic field experienced by the dowser will make his or her forearm react in an analogous manner, i.e. so that a twitching movement arises.

Nordell addresses his hypothesis in the same basic way any natural scientist might go about testing an empirical claim. Laboratory tests were conducted on the bone of the lower front leg of pigs. Sensitive measuring apparatuses, strain gauges, were used in order to measure mechanical reactions. Voltmeters were employed in order to quantify the opposite reaction, i.e. the generation of an electrical current under mechanical strain. Nordell would seem to live in a different world than the Palme dowsers. If the Palme dowsers occasionally remind one of African village diviners, Bo Nordell comes across as a representative of mainstream western natural science. There is nothing paranormal, let alone occult or religious, in his approach.

Since dowsing is at best deemed to be a fringe science by most scientists, it can only be expected that academics who support dowsing will be approached by the media, their results will be used as a source of legitimacy by other dowsers, which in turn leads to attacks from skep-

[8] Internal Report 1, Department of Water Resources Engineering, Luleå University of Technology.

tically inclined scientists. Bo Nordell is not the only or even the most highly profiled supporter of dowsing. Three cases caused a considerable stir in the Swedish media, and will be briefly summarized.

Nils-Axel Mörner is associate professor at the Department of Palaeogeophysics and Dynamic Geology at the University of Stockholm. Although dowsing might seem to be only marginally relevant to his academic pursuits, Mörner attracted media attention when he in 1995 began to organize practical courses in dowsing. Several of these gave the distinct but unwarranted impression of being sanctioned by his department.[9] Mörner and his assistants understand dowsing as a technique with vast applications. Participants in his courses were given practical instruction in a variety of aspects of dowsing. In one part of the course they observed flowing water, were then shown how flowing water affected readings on a conventional instrument, the VLF (Very Low Frequency meter) and were thereafter given the opportunity to test whether they would get any reaction when approaching the flowing water with a dowsing rod. Those who did not succeed at the first trial were coached in various methods to allow the reaction to take place. Mörner's courses have also involved detecting human auras, ley lines, and Curry and Hartmann lines, forms of invisible energy that according to dowsing literature rise up from the ground and are generally believed to follow parallel paths through the landscape.[10]

The next case concerns Leif Engh, at the time a lecturer in geography at Lund University, who in 1983 wrote a report with the title 'Detektering av underjordiska vattendrag' ('Detecting Flowing Water Underground'). Engh compares four methods, three conventional ones and dowsing. In the dowsing experiment, 33 dowsers were asked to walk along a set path and to note when their rods indicated the presence of water. The result indicated that the dowsers detected water with considerably better results than expected by chance. Engh's report went so far as to conclude that dowsing was superior to all three conventional

[9] Details of Mörner's courses and the reactions of his department can be found in Cantwell 'Slaget om slagrutan', 78–84.

[10] More specifically, Curry lines (named after Manfred Curry, 1899–1953) are said to form a grid of lines running at a distance of a few meters from each other diagonally to the cardinal directions, while Hartmann lines (named after Ernst Hartmann, 1915–1992) are understood as a grid running parallel to the cardinal directions. Places where these lines cross are often claimed to negatively influence health.

methods, a result so controversial and unexpected that Sweden's largest tabloid *Expressen* published an account.[11]

The final example concerns Dick Sjöberg, who received a grant of 60,000 Swedish crowns (approximately 6,500 euros) to write a report on earth energies. The report, published in 1991, generated considerable publicity because it turned out that it supported the belief in Curry and Hartmann lines. Critics claimed that Sjöberg had based his report on a personal conviction, rather than impartially presenting a conclusion based on empirical evidence.

While the existence of untold numbers of dowsers and believers in dowsing is passed by in silence in the media, these few individuals were the focus of attention of several major newspapers in Sweden. Their results have been quoted by believers as proof of the efficacy of dowsing and by critics as tell-tale signs of the lack of rigorous standards in contemporary academic life. The media have lent themselves to either interpretation, since individual newspaper articles have reflected either the dowsers' or the skeptics' point of view.

Much of this apologetic literature employs two basic tropes in support of the technique. Most importantly, the scientific status of dowsing is stressed in a variety of ways. The systematic use of dowsing apparatus is referred to as *research*, the method is affirmed to produce *consistent and reproducible results*,[12] or as a proven physical reality.[13] There are suggestions that the practice should be referred to by a different (and presumably more scientifically respectable) name such as *biolocation* or *geobiology*.

The identification of a plausible *modus operandi* is an important element in arguing for the scientific validity of dowsing. Different authors will agree that some mechanism known from mainstream research into physics and human physiology must be involved, but propose widely different specifics. To summarize, the suggestions include sensitivity of the most diverse parts of the dowser's body (brain, nervous system, retina, pineal gland, kidneys, adrenal glands, heart, or skin) to a full range of physical and para-physical stimuli (electric potential, magnetism, radioactivity, "earth energies").

Others position themselves more liminally in respect to the mainstream scientific field, by attempting to link dowsing with paranormal

[11] *Expressen*, 14 May 1983.
[12] Wilcock, 'The Use of Dowsing'.
[13] Magnusson, 'Forskning om slagrutan'.

phenomena such as telepathy or psychokinesis—phenomena which are greeted with considerable skepticism by many scientists, but are regarded as empirically proven facts by their supporters. Finally, some simply note that dowsing works, that the *modus operandi* must be a natural rather than an occult one, but that the details remain unknown.[14] It has been suggested that dowsers with New Age interests tend to present quasi-naturalistic explanations, whereas old-style rural dowsers who use their craft in order to find water or oil frequently refrain from explaining their purported successes.[15]

Less prominent than the argument from science, but nonetheless quite frequent in apologetic literature, is the argument from history. References to the ancient precedents for dowsing can be explicitly adduced as evidence for the validity of the practice. Nils Holgerson's use of dowsing to locate the perpetrator of a crime is supported by referring to the French seventeenth-century dowser Jacques Aymar who also solved murders by paranormal means. Even where they are presented as a simple chronicle of facts, with no obvious connection to the rest of the text, glimpses into the ancient history of dowsing are suggestive. John Wilcock begins his brief survey of dowsing with a reference to a cave painting from 6000 BC, suggesting that the practice is cross-cultural, truly ancient and thus not a locally constructed divinatory practice but a universal and empirically valid method: 'if something doesn't work, we tend not to use it for long'.[16]

3. *Apologetics and Practice*

In several ways, the apologetic literature presents a strategically skewed image of dowsing.[17] Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that a basic rhetorical strategy is to forge textual links with potential sources of legitimacy, and disassociate oneself from more problematic bedfellows.[18] Engh and Mörner focus exclusively on mundane pursuits such as finding water. Wilcock recalls that dowsing has been employed by

[14] Betz, *Geheimnis Wünschelrute*, 28; Uhre, *Ønskekvistens mysterium*, 15.
[15] Jerkert, 'Slagrutan', 22.
[16] Miller, 'Dowsing'.
[17] The term 'strategically' here means 'useful for a specific rhetorical purpose', but should not be read as an implication that dowsing authors deliberately intend to redescribe their practice.
[18] Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, *New Rhetoric*, 190–191.

such down-to-earth institutions as engineering firms, water companies, the mining industry, laundries, breweries, building contractors, government departments, even the police and the armed forces. Conversely, those dowsing practices that risk appearing eccentric from the majority perspective are tacitly bypassed. The pursuits of the private Palme investigators, the occult search for prehistoric giants, the investigation of leylines, and the practice of dowsing on maps rather than in the field, will by sheer measure of their perceived otherness fall outside the bounds of much apologetic discourse.

Furthermore, apologetic texts focus on the putatively rational and systematic nature of dowsing, at the expense of the more fortuitous circumstances that lead people to accept the practice. Discussions with the rank and file of the Swedish dowsing community suggest that the clinching argument for many dowsers is personal experience. Dowsing has been tried, the Y-shaped fork or L-shaped rods seemed to move on their own, and water was found at the site in question. From this basis, dowsers will gradually immerse themselves in a shared discourse, a social milieu where others share the same conviction. As with any belief system, an interpretive drift begins to set in.[19] By interacting with other dowsers, one learns to interpret experiences in a way that fits the dowsing perspective. Only post hoc, if at all, does the question of the scientific legitimacy of dowsing become important. One learns to adopt rationalist arguments that reflect positively on a belief system and a practice that one has accepted for other, more personal reasons. The primacy of personal experience shines through in the recurrent argument against skeptics, that their arguments can safely be ignored because they have never mastered the technique of dowsing.[20]

Thirdly, apologetic discourse presents dowsing as an extension of mainstream science. Dowsing has no mystical properties; it just enhances reactions experienced by the dowsers themselves. Those reactions are typically attributed to specific and well-known natural processes. Everybody agrees that the piezoelectric effect exists; Nordell simply extends its range of application to a controversial domain.

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[19] Luhrmann, *Persuasions*, ch. 21.

[20] In turn, some critics of dowsing have learned the technique. I have thus had a leading member of the Swedish skeptics' society use L-shaped rods to 'detect the size of my aura', which was explicitly done as a joke at the expense of those who believe in this particular application of dowsing.

Finally, it rationalizes and streamlines a mosaic of different techniques, applied for a variety of only partly compatible reasons to a host of diverse applications. Dowsing did not spring into existence in recent times, as a construct adapted to the sensibilities of a contemporary age, engrossed with the rhetorical strength of science. It grew over a long period of time through a process of gradual and fortuitous accretion. Over a recorded history of nearly five hundred years, a number of new applications and new practices have been included to the repertoire.

This is not the place to present more than the sketchiest historiography of dowsing.[21] It will here suffice to give some points of reference. Manuscript sources suggest that the divining rod was in use in the fifteenth century. The first unambiguous printed reference to the practice is a passage from Georg Agricola's *De re metallica*, published in 1556. As the name of his book implies, Agricola refers to finding ore; water divining is recorded in the seventeenth century, the oldest documentary evidence for this practice dates from 1605.[22] Water divining became more widely known in the 1630s when the baron and baroness de Beausoleil recommend the divining rod for locating springs. In 1692, the celebrated case of the dowser Jacques Aymar introduced yet another application of dowsing. Like his colleagues in Stockholm 300 years later, Aymar claimed to have the ability to track down criminals through dowsing. A major innovation of the twentieth century is the belief that dowsers can detect certain kinds of otherwise unknown forces in the earth. This suggestion originated with Gustav von Pohl in his *Erdstrahlen als Krankheitserreger* (1932), and has been conflated with later but similar claims, e.g. that the earth is crisscrossed by noxious Curry and Hartmann lines that can be detected through dowsing. Even more recent is the concept of the psi track referred to above, first suggested by Nils-Olof Jacobson and Jan Tellefsen.[23] The psi track is described as an invisible trace that connects an object with a person thinking of that object.

The range of variation is related to the way in which such innovations spread. New methods and applications of dowsing diffuse through a large and very loosely structured milieu of interested individuals. The diffusion depends on the existence of networks of people with similar

[21] For a more extensive treatment of dowsing in the older period, see e.g. Klinkowstroem, *Handbuch*, 1–61, from which parts of the present summary have been culled.
[22] Klinckowstroem, *Handbuch*, 41.
[23] Jacobson & Tellefsen, 'Dowsing along the Psi Track'.

interests, and of forums where these interests can be expressed. Both the networks and the forums of publication are characterized by the lack of central authority. There is a considerable volume of literature on dowsing, but very little of it is published by mainstream publishers or in journals in seemingly relevant areas such as hydrology, geology, archaeology, or even popular science. Hence, there is no peer review process and no central institution with the ambition or authority to support some of these novelties and suppress others.

From the perspective of a historical model that emphasizes the contingent nature of gradual accretions over a long span of time, the instrumental and "scientific" version of dowsing appears as an elite mode of explanation that only lately has spread to larger segments of the dowsing community. While magico-religious explanations can be found in older sources,[24] some authors have at least since the seventeenth century constructed quasi-physical models for the action of the divining rod. Popular dowsing folklore is less well documented,[25] but there are suggestions that supernatural or folk religious explanations of the phenomenon seem to have been preponderant until relatively recent times. Only as knowledge of such physical forces as electricity and magnetism have become widespread among the broader population, have naturalistic explanations become common. Researchers collecting folklore on dowsing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries record prayers, elaborate ritualistic methods of gathering twigs to be used in divining, and theories of magical sympathy uniting diviner and divining rod.[26] A Swedish folklorist could in 1949 document the shift, reporting that 'people used to associate this mysterious phenomenon with the supernatural', but that his informants now generally attributed the dowsing ability to 'the amount of electricity stored in the body'.[27] Naturalism has, however, by no means completely supplanted references to the supernatural. The setting and tone of much dowsing literature presents a picture far removed from the sober character of the apologetic texts. To refer to the Swedish context once again, beside truly specialized publications written by and for dowsers, some of the

[24] Klinkowstroem, *Handbuch*, 2–8 and *passim*, documents astrological beliefs, incantations, and other magico-religious practices associated with the use of divining rod.

[25] See, however, Herold, 'Wünschelrute'.

[26] Folklore collected in Hungary in the 1880s and 1890s, and in Bohemia (present-day Czech Republic) in 1902, summarized in Klinkowstroem, *Handbuch*, 5–8.

[27] Swedish folklorist G. Ränk, as quoted in Jerkert, 'Slagrutan', 17.

major sites where information on dowsing can be found are New Age magazines, literature published by presses whose catalogues mainly comprise occult and metaphysical literature, and various Internet sites with similarly eclectic interests. Perusing the journals and web sites, one is struck by the way in which dowsing articles are published next to advertisements or articles on a host of non-dowsing topics which appeal to other people with various interests that lie outside the dominant ideologies of the post-Enlightenment West. An issue in Sweden's oldest New Age magazine, *Sökaren*, featuring an article on the psi track, also had articles on the well-know channeled text *A Course in Miracles*, on Vedanta philosophy, and on angels.[28] Courses in dowsing advertised on the Internet are presented together with offers for courses in, among other things, qigong, kabbalah, magic, channeling, shamanism, and past-life therapy.[29]

The close connection between dowsing and other alternative pursuits, ignored in apologetic texts, is often quite explicit in discourse directed at the dowsing community itself. A few examples can indicate the tone of such statements. The *American Society of Dowsers* presents its activities thus: 'The American Society of Dowsers (ASD) is an open forum embracing those who wish to experience expanded consciousness through the ancient art of dowsing'.[30] *Mid-Atlantic Geomancy* suggests that dowsing is a 'technique for tapping into the collective unconscious, or All Mind [...] to seek information and guidance from God/dess'. Dowser Dan Mattsson's home page presents it as a means to 'allow us to understand that all living things are connected to each other by invisible forces'.[31] An Internet site significantly entitled *Dowsing, Spirituality and the Kabbalah Connection* explains: 'When most people think of dowsing, or divining, they think of using a forked tree branch to find a place to drill a water well. This is how dowsing started, but dowsing has gone far beyond looking for water. [...] I use dowsing, combined with prayer and

[28] *Sökaren* 2001:4.

[29] Examples on the Internet are ubiquitous, a few examples at random are www.anamspirit.com/anam.html, www.mysticalblaze.com and www.spiritual.com.au (all accessed 26 August 2006). See also Barrett & Vogt, 'Urban American Dowser', 198, who summarize a survey which indicates that many individual dowsers were also interested in other "alternative" pursuits, such as ESP, UFOs, and faith healing.

[30] Reproduced on several sites where ASD members are presented, e.g. www.spirithunter.net/faq.htm and www.spiritway.com/community.htm (both accessed 28 August 2006).

[31] Dan Mattson's personal homepage, at www.geomancy.org (accessed 26 August 2006).

blessing, to help people grow spiritually and take charge of their lives—to find the treasure buried *within*'.[32]

Dowsing for these and many other practitioners operates in mysterious ways that are not expected to emulate secular technologies, but on the contrary go beyond the ordinary five senses and perhaps even undermine the dogmatic materialism of mainstream science. Ultimately, dowsing is for many practitioners informed by a culture critique: for them, anti-dowsing critics have cut themselves off from life-affirming connections with a nurturing, invisible world.

4. *Dowsing and the Skeptics*

Beyond the instrumental and (para-)scientific image projected in the apologetic literature, dowsing comes across as an element of what sociologist Colin Campbell in a seminal article labeled the cultic milieu.[33] Campbell's well-known characterization of the cultic milieu includes epithets such as 'the cultural underground of society', and repeatedly uses the adjective *deviant*: the cultic milieu espouses deviant medicine, the elements of the cultic milieu are deviant items. Participants in the milieu experienced the 'ridicule and hostility of the larger society'.[34] This view of the cultic milieu as radically other had its justification in the early 1970s, when Campbell formulated his typology.

At the time of writing, more than three decades later, the picture is a rather different one. Opinions and practices that were once perceived as rather odd minority views have spread throughout society. The prototypical participants in many "alternative" activities today appear to be fairly well-educated middle class individuals in their 40's and 50's.[35] Reactions from mainstream society would seem to have increasingly gone from the ridicule and hostility that Campbell wrote of, to a kind of mild indifference and low-key exclusion from "elite" circles. The Palme dowsers were not met with an indignant outcry, much less with the instruments of repression of an inquisition; they were simply ignored.

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[32] Korn, 'Dowsing'.

[33] For the term *cultic milieu* see Campbell, 'The cult, the cultic milieu and secularization'. Although the words 'cult' and 'cultic' have an inherent negative bias, and may therefore not be the most suitable labels for the phenomenon in question, no alternative term has become established in the literature.

[34] Ibid., 122.

[35] See, e.g., Frisk, 'New Age Participants in Sweden'.

Their own consternation at not being taken seriously by the police can perhaps be better understood in the light of the fact that several of Sweden's commercial TV channels routinely broadcast programs favorably presenting "alternative" topics, including solving crimes by paranormal means.[36] The rationale behind dowsing seems be migrating from the cultic milieu to the mainstream of popular culture.

Nonetheless, indifference from the main institutions of society does not mean an entire lack of polemical responses from outsiders. Opponents attempt to point at purported errors in those views, supposedly irrational motives behind the practices. Adherents of "cultic" practices will, in turn, attempt to explain to themselves and to others why this hostility arises and why they themselves are right.

"Cultic milieu" activities such as dowsing are based on rejected knowledge in the specific sense that they are circulated through private networks of interested people and through privately organized and financed markets, and are rarely if ever invoked in publicly sponsored activities such as education, health care, legislation, or politics.[37] However, none of these public domains institutes any particular measures to combat such activities. In European societies, in which the state apparatus has become largely secularized, it takes special interest groups—usually meaning representatives of various Christian churches or organized skeptics—to support or combat religious perspectives. In fact, both adherents of "rejected" practices and their declared opponents are united by the fact of representing diffusely formulated minority positions, and both may be said to represent cultic milieus.[38]

Rationalist and Christian-theological arguments against alternative practices have long coexisted, but in the contemporary period, to which we shall direct our attention, the arguments for and against dowsing revolve around its purported empirical validity. In contemporary anti-dowsing literature, the religious perspective is rather marginal.[39] At present, the main body of anti-dowsing writers consists of prominent

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[36] Such programs include *Andarnas makt* ('Power of the Spirits'), *Hemsökta hus* ('Haunted Houses') and *Det okända* ('The Unknown') on Swedish channel TV4.

[37] Exceptions do exist, and depend on the customs and legislation in particular countries; homeopathy in Germany would be a case in point.

[38] Although statistical figures of indifference to "alternative" practices are understandably hard to come by, both adherents and critics are likely to be minorities in a population where most people presumably have no strong opinion.

[39] For an example of Christian argumentation (suggesting that dowsing is an occult art), see Weldon, 'Dowsing'.

members of skeptics' movements, the archetypal example of which is the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal or CSICOP.[40] While dowsing certainly forms part of the targets of such organizations, this is in a sense merely symptomatic of the rationalist resistance against cultic milieu practices generally.

Skeptics attempt to undermine the credibility of the dowsers by essentially doing the same as the minority of academically oriented dowsers: by redescribing dowsing as a science. In the skeptic's perception, it is of course a failed one. Many of us are so familiar with scientific debunking attempts that it may require a slight *Verfremdung* to realize how dependent this mode of arguing is on a specific cultural context. While it is hard to imagine western rationalists bringing back the sticks, nuts, and cowry shells of the African diviner to the laboratory, testing them and declaring that they have no predictive effect, something analogous is done in the case of dowsing. What in a sufficiently exotic context is given the status of an ethnographic datum that can be understood by means of a culturally informed interpretive hermeneutic, is in our more familiar surroundings by skeptics felt to be a para-scientific hypothesis in need of empirical testing.

As we have seen, apologetic texts point at the existence of a number of experimental studies that purportedly support dowsing. The authors of those texts furthermore attempt to formulate scientifically plausible explanations for these successful cases. Skeptical literature presents a two-pronged mode of attack. Skeptics will set up their own experiments, or deconstruct the experiments carried out by the dowsers, and will in either case conclude that dowsing works no better than chance. They will furthermore try to provide a scientifically plausible explanation for the dowers' persistent, subjective feeling of success in the face of actual failure.[41]

For the purposes of understanding the polemical interchange between skeptics and dowsers, it is particularly instructive to note that some experimental studies are used by either side to support its own perspective. The same set of data is interpreted by dowsers as a sign of

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[40] The story of CSICOP is told in Kurtz (ed.), *Skeptical Odysseys*, 11–13.

[41] There are numerous empirical studies of dowsing, including Dale et al., 'Dowsing'; König et al., 'Wünschelruten-Test', Macfayden, 'Some water divining'; and Martin, 'A controlled dowsing experiment'. Prokop & Wimmer, *Wünschelrute*, 18–86, surveys a host of other studies. Generally speaking, controlled double-blind tests produce negative results for dowsing, while less methodologically rigorous tests can produce positive results.

their success, and by skeptics as an example of how dowsers are able to delude themselves. The fact that the same studies can be understood as supporting either camp, has largely to do with the sheer technicality of the evidence. Skeptics will typically point out that a number of precise methodological strictures need to be in place, in order to test whether dowsing actually works.

Firstly, the purpose of dowsing must be to discover something that can be corroborated by other means. Dowsing for Curry and Hartmann lines makes little sense for the skeptics, since there are no independent means of verification. On the other hand, dowsing for water can be tested, since drilling and other intersubjectively accepted methods can check whether water can actually be found at the spot where the dowser indicated that it should. Secondly, experiments must be controlled, so that it actually is the success rate of dowsing that one measures. If one dowses for water, one needs to compensate for the fact that water is very common, that random sampling will "discover" numerous places where water occurs naturally and that there are tell-tale signs in the vegetation that show where water can be found. If the person who conducted a specific test was present and knew e.g. where the object to be found was located, that serves to disqualify the study in question. Finally, experiments typically consist of series of individual dowsing tests, which need to be systematically assessed by means of standardized statistical procedures. These factors, skeptics argue, make empirical testing a very delicate matter, and the risk of flawed methodology—and therefore of worthless tests—is great.

One of the most contentious and frequently quoted experimental studies of dowsing in recent times is the Munich barn test.[42] In 1986, the German government allocated 400,000 German marks (approximately 204,000 euros or 260,000 dollars) to setting up a large-scale experimental assessment of dowsing. Some 500 individuals were in a double-blind study asked to locate a stretch of pipe in which water could flow, and which could be placed at random under the floor of a large barn. Most of the subjects were unable to detect the location of the pipe with any success better than chance. A small group of 43 dowsers, however,

[42] Experiments documented in Betz, *Geheimnis Wünschelrute*, 180–220; 'Neue Ergebnisse'; and 'Dowsing Reviewed'. For a critical appraisal, see Enright, 'Testing Dowsing'. Beside the Munich barn test, perhaps only the dowsing test carried out in 1990 in the city of Kassel by the German skeptics' organization GWUP has generated a similar amount of controversy; see König et al., 'Wünschelruten-Test'.

was selected as being more successful than their peers, and these were asked to perform a second extended series of tests. The results were then interpreted by statistical methods, with diametrically opposed conclusions. Herbert König and Hans-Dieter Betz, who conducted the experiment, concluded that for an even smaller group of six dowsers, a real effect had been demonstrated. Critics concluded from the very same evidence that dowsing does not function better than what would be expected by chance. Several articles were published, some in defense of König and Betz, some as further evidence against their study. The Munich experiment soon turned into an acrimonious polemics centered on—for the layperson—truly arcane details in statistics.

Professor of behavioral psychology Jim Enright in particular voiced misgivings about the methods used in assessing the data. In particular, he pointed out that the six dowsers that were said to be the best in the experiment had also participated in other test runs than the ones singled out as evidence for dowsing, and that they performed worse in those attempts. Enright thus suggested that König and Betz had hand-picked a small set of results that would confirm dowsing.[43] His reanalysis of the data concluded that only one single dowser out of 500 actually outperformed chance in pinpointing the location of the water-filled pipe, and this by a mere average four millimeters.[44]

What, then, are we to make of the dowers' persistent feeling of success, their certainty that "if something doesn't work, we tend not to use it for long"? Although the validity of the method for e.g. finding water may be controversial, skeptics will readily concede that something really does produce a tugging sensation in the arms holding the divining rod. The standard explanation commonly referred to by skeptics is a classic study by the French chemist Michel Eugène Chevreul, who in the second decade of the nineteenth century conducted what they perceive to be the clinching test of the dowsing mechanism.[45] In brief, Chevreul suspected that the reflexes involved in using the various dowsing implements might be generated and amplified by the person using the implements. If one knows what the pendulum is supposed to do, it is almost impossible not to subconsciously make the pendulum produce precisely that kind of motion. If one is blindfolded so that one

[43] Enright, 'Testing Dowsing', 10.
[44] Enright, 'Testing Dowsing', 15.
[45] An English translation of Chevreul's letter can be found in Spitz & Marcuard, 'Chevreul's Report'.

cannot see what reaction one is amplifying, or if the arm holding the pendulum is supported, the reflex does not arise.

Both forms of skeptical argumentation are normatively valid, if one accepts a basic presupposition: that dowsing is intended to function as an empirically based technology. This is an almost unavoidable line of reasoning, since the apologetic literature follows the very same track. The cost of this approach is the lack of interest of most skeptical literature in dowsing as a cultural practice, or any discussion of what dowsing as an activity might mean for any other participants in the cultic milieu than the scientific-minded cultural brokers. Belief in dowsing appears for them as a stubborn refusal to abandon a practice that has been conclusively disproved.

Skeptics produce characteristic narratives in order to explain why dowsers and believers in dowsing are apparently not swayed by what they consider to be rational arguments. Printed skeptical sources concentrate heavily on psychological mechanisms, they basically cite and refer to the same studies that cognitive and social psychologists might do. Skeptics refer to such mechanisms as selective memory, the fact that dowsers will remember the times when they have succeeded in e.g. finding an object but will underestimate the number of times they did not. They will point at the well-known placebo effect when people with somatic complaints are told by dowsers that their beds lie on sites where noxious earth energies cross, move the bed to another location in the house, and soon begin to feel better.

Selective memory and the subjective validation of hypotheses are classics of cognitive psychology, any textbook for students will discuss these elements of human cognition at length. Cognitive errors can of course be interpreted as signs that people are able to delude themselves. When one reads the psychological literature, rather than the skeptical one, one does not get the impression that this research is intended to convey any overtly normative or moral implications. It is just the case that we are hard-wired with certain cognitive traits. A divinatory practice that indicates the operation of one or several such traits merely constitutes yet another datum that can be used to illustrate and understand an interesting facet of the human mental apparatus. Calling subjective validation a cognitive *error* might possibly justify the term "moral" in scare quotes, but in the psychological literature no group is singled out as being particularly prone to succumbing to it. To the extent that experimental psychologists draw any "moral" conclusion at all, it is that the processes involved are probably universal and apply to individuals

regardless of their intelligence as measured by IQ, their gender, level of education, and so forth. The implication is rather that cognitive errors exist in us all, and that divination therefore fits so well with our cognitive capacities that it basically requires strong social mechanisms to counteract belief.

Skeptics will often draw a much stronger moral conclusion from the same data. This is caused by the simultaneous invocation of cognitive psychological explanations with two other explanations that are closely related to each other, but are not immediately compatible with the psychological one.

The first we might call the argument from pathology. According to this mode of reasoning, there is something fundamentally wrong with people who believe in "pseudo-science". They must be unusually naive, deluded, or irrational. The skeptical Internet article 'Dowsing—Science or Humbug?' suggests that 'hypochondria, imprudent curiosity and plain ignorance all help futile ideas disperse'. Dowsing is apparently so patently absurd that 'designing proper tests for this ludicrous claim is so simple that I won't offend the reader by suggesting any'.[46]

The second is the argument from immorality. This mode of reasoning affirms that there is something ethically wrong with dowsing, since practitioners charge a fee for a service that "does not work". In this sense elite skeptics have a double aim of explaining a contested phenomenon in naturalistic terms, but also of depicting it as a moral problem. The same critic of dowsing phrases the argument in this way: 'Fervent proponents are acquiring substantial power over people's minds by appealing to simple instincts such as self-defense, need for safety, and maternal instincts (Who would like to have one's baby sleep on a spot that might cause cancer?)'.[47] A number of discursive tropes are thus used to project an image of a practice that is deluded, harmful to society, and disseminated by people with potentially immoral motives. An example among many is an article in the Swedish skeptics' magazine *Folkvett*, with the tell-tale title 'Goblins, trolls and Curry lines' ('Tomtar, troll och Currykryss'). The author suggests that proponents of dowsing for earth energies are not merely a few isolated crackpots (*knäppgökar*); underestimating the number of believers may be reassuring, but is dangerously insouciant (*farligt aningslös*). In reality, dowsing is a belief

[46] Jansson, 'Dowsing'.
[47] Jansson, 'Dowsing'.

system propagated by energetic and charismatic missionaries, who use pseudo-scientific jargon and a wide-spread hypochondria and paranoia to spread their fantastic ideas. The author summarizes: 'Earth energy mythology creates an intellectual slum'.[48]

The spectrum of skeptical counterclaims, from those which suggest that dowsers are sincere and merely mistaken or misguided, to those that argue that dowsers are both irrational and immoral, roughly corresponds to the level of aggression in the language used. The debate surrounding the Munich test was generally conducted in a very cool rhetoric, with statistical formulas and suggestive graphs as the warrant for the truth claims of each side. Another example of skeptical argumentation at the cool end of the emotional scale is represented by Jesper Jerkert, member of the Swedish skeptics' society *Vetenskap och Folkbildning* and author of several texts on dowsing. Dowsers, he suggests, live in a collectively shared illusion, but it is their right to do so. The point of carrying out empirical investigations of the phenomenon is to provide background material for decision making. Considering the sums invested in dowsing for oil, or the potential cost in human lives when diseases are diagnosed wrongly or when a search for missing people is conducted by means of dowsing, scientific investigation has an important place.[49]

Texts that suggest that the belief in dowsing is a mental aberration, a sickness or a contagious cultural evil can employ significantly more militant language. In their struggle against "superstition", some will go to considerable verbal lengths. Authors Otto Prokop and Wolf Wimmer characterize dowsers as 'the superstitious mercenary souls of the dowsing cult'.[50] One of the best known and least diplomatic skeptics, James Randi, commented on Nils-Axel Mörner's attempts to justify dowsing, and called him a "pompous-assed 'dowsing expert'". A TV show in which Mörner participated was according to Randi 'drearily predictable' and was described as a program in which 'Morner blathered on about "interference" and mumbled about "influences" and "might be here" and the usual alibis'.[51]

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[48] Essén, 'Tomtar'.

[49] Jerkert, 'Slagrutan'.

[50] '[…] abergläubischen […] Geschäftemachern der Radiästhesie-Sekte', Prokop & Wimmer, *Wünschelrute*, x.

[51] Randi, 'Looking in on Sweden'.

There is of course no objective scale that can rank one empirically controversial or even false claim as being more absurd or less rational than another. The offensive tone adopted by at least some skeptics is all the more remarkable if one compares it to the more subdued vocabulary usually employed when discussing the empirically testable statements made by representatives of older or socially more respected traditions. Presumably, most people would consider it perfectly legitimate to voice doubts, or to flatly state that one disagrees with the truth claims of a Christian or a Buddhist. Norms of socially acceptable behavior would, however, prevent most critics from stating on the record that the Buddhist or Christian spokesperson is 'pompous-assed' or that their statements of faith are 'blathered out in a drearily predictable fashion'. Crude invectives seem to be reserved for the perceived "fringe" opinion.

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, few dowsers go to any lengths in order to systematically support the validity their practices. Even fewer attempt to actively engage in counter-polemics in order to defuse specific criticisms directed at them by the skeptics. Besides positioning himself as a prominent defender of dowsing, Hans-Dieter Betz is one of the rare authors who have responded to Randi and his colleagues with explicit counterclaims. In part, these rely on the same kind of sarcastic, moralizing language employed by some skeptics. James Randi himself is presented in a section entitled *Der 100 000-Dollar-Bluff*, alluding to the financial reward promised by the Randi Foundation to anybody who succeeds to demonstrate a paranormal ability under strict experimental conditions.[52] Skeptics are accused of extreme one-sidedness,[53] of being crusaders who resort to questionable and even destructive tactics in their attempts to deny the validity of dowsing.[54]

Besides broadly aimed counter-accusations such as these, one also finds more narrowly targeted arguments that address the purported prejudices and ignorance of the skeptics. However, these often do not grapple with the specifics of skeptical critique. Skeptics will for instance suggest that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. If I suggest that I located a source of water by looking for luxuriant plant life and other signs in the landscape, this claim is inherently more plausible than a suggestion that I was able to perform the feat merely

[52] Betz, *Geheimnis Wünschelrute*, 285.
[53] Ibid., 281.
[54] Ibid., 283; 303.

by letting two metal rods swing at will in my hands. The latter claim therefore needs considerably more evidence to support it, than does the former. Betz argues that skeptics thereby place undue demands on research into dowsing, but does not back up his complaint with any further argumentation.[55] Skeptics will suggest that dowsers are unusually resistant to all the evidence that suggests that they pick up clues that permit them to find water, and that without these hints they perform no better than chance. Dowsers retort that they have found water successfully for many centuries, and that there is no evidence to support the contention that overt clues play such a paramount role.[56] Skeptics argue that experiments conducted by dowsers are methodologically flawed; dowsers reply that the reason why so few experiments show positive results is that skeptics are engaged in a concerted hostile action.[57]

Remarkably, argumentation along these lines has been conducted at least since the early twentieth century. The outside observer to such interchanges of polemics and counter-polemics easily gets the impression that the parties in the battle of words repeat the same arguments over and over, and never manage to communicate in any meaningful sense.

5. *Concluding Remarks*

Nobody believes every single proposition that they have ever been confronted with. Few of us, on the other hand, devote time and energy to actively refuting or combating opinions with which we disagree. It requires a special interest group that constructs such practices as dowsing as a social and moral problem. Skeptical groups are largely constituted of individuals whose background is in the sciences, and whose view of rationality is grounded in the basic norms of scientific investigation. Dowsers produce truth claims, and these can be tested according to well-established criteria. One of the most basic of these is that subjective validation is useless. The reflexes identified by Chevreul will induce effects that must be ruled out, if one wishes to identify effects due to dowsing rather than to the subconscious reactions of the individual. Skeptics can explain the resistance against their explanations of dowsing

[55] Ibid., 268.
[56] Ibid., 271–272.
[57] Ibid., 272–273.

as the combined effect of human folly and of the activity of various purveyors of false claims.

Many dowsers—as well as innumerable other representatives of "alternative" pursuits—follow very different standards of rationality. Personal experience is paramount, the innumerable successes of putting dowsing to the practical test makes it seem positively absurd to reject the validity of the practice. Once accepted on subjective grounds, dowsing is for many a pathway into a spiritual framework permeated by a sentiment of connectedness with a greater whole and an openness to hidden levels of reality.

Apologists for dowsing are cultural hybrids. They defend at least some of the claims of the "alternative" camp, but disenchant the practice, to some extent accepting the methods of mainstream natural science in their apologetics. The cultural context in which they formulate their claims, where science has an unrivaled rhetorical appeal, may make this line of defense the obvious choice. However, as the vitriolic contempt of the skeptical community amply illustrates, presenting dowsing as a science is a strategy that comes with a heavy price.

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SEEKING ANCIENT WISDOM IN THE NEW AGE: NEW AGE AND NEOGNOSTIC COMMENTARIES ON THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Dylan Burns

1. *Introduction*

Personal identity is negotiated within a complex of social groups, and is formed not only from within a group but also from without.[1] It is fragmented,[2] each affirmation of identity being a separate reference to difference with some "other" social group.[3] At times discourses of identity are primarily concerned with differentiation and achieve it by vilifying the "other" in reference to the ongoing discourse about the self; they polemicize.[4]

This study in polemics and esotericism will discuss how the *Gospel of Thomas* (Nag Hammadi Codex II, tractate 2) has been appropriated in New Age and Neognostic discourse, in the form of commentaries, in order to fulminate against "mainstream Christianity" and secular culture. In these commentaries a diverse array of fragmented identities (Christian, Gnostic, Jungian, Buddhist, New Ager, scholar, seeker, mystic, etc.) are negotiated in the effort to differentiate the self and its esoteric truth-claims from what is perceived as intolerant Christendom and spiritually vapid popular culture. The *Gospel of Thomas* offers what James Fernandez terms 'peripheral wisdom', which excoriates the perceived center (Christian and secular culture) while relishing the ambivalence of 'the desire to at once escape the identity constrictions of boundedness' and, at the same time, 'to celebrate and privilege the separate identity it confers'.[5] Significantly, these commentaries criticize the violence and

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[1] Becker, *Deviance*, 9–14, 181–189; Cohen, 'Introduction', 1.
[2] Whitebrook, *Identity*, esp. 52–55; 82–85; 150–152.
[3] Kippenberg & von Stuckrad, *Einführung*, 157.
[4] See also the general discussion of Cancik, 'Apologetik/Polemik'. For analysis of the necessity of religious polemics in social interaction see ter Borg, 'Social Importance', esp. 441–443.
[5] Fernandez, 'Peripheral Wisdom', 132.

intolerance of mainstream religion, a charge paradoxically asserted in a polemical and at times venomous fashion.[6]

I will discuss five *Thomas* commentaries, two of which dub themselves '(neo)-Gnostic', although I will argue that they are beholden entirely to New Age interests and speculations. At the conclusion I will briefly discuss some instances where *Thomas* scholarship (the work of Helmut Koester, Elaine Pagels, and Marvin Meyer) has been appropriated in these New Age commentaries. It is my hope that this section of the paper will contribute not only to the study of esotericism but also to the conversation in Nag Hammadi studies about how the wealth of scholarship produced about the find has been received outside the academy.

Before moving to the *Thomas* commentaries it is important to define the nebulous phenomenon commonly designated as the "New Age". Following Hanegraaff's extensive study of the New Age movement *sensu lato*, I take it to be a variegated discourse covering holistic science, "channeling", positive thinking/New Thought, and alternative medicine, unified by its concern with a holistic worldview[7] as a culture criticism of the fragmented world of modernism and religious sectarianism.[8] Its truth-claims are best characterized as "esoteric", which is to say New Agers commonly employ mystical and secretive language when discussing the holistic knowledge they famously seek out.[9] Hanegraaff calls the New Age a 'secularized esotericism',[10] as it draws extensively from esoteric sources such as Hermetic, Gnostic, and theosophical texts while psychologizing them, interpreting the mystical knowledge of esoteric sources to be the actualization of one's psyche.[11] While not all New

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[6] For discussion of anti-exclusivist rhetoric in New Age discourse see Hanegraaff, 'Prospects'.

[7] Hanegraaff, 'New Age Movement', 372; for an expanded analysis with special attention to holistic science, see idem, *New Age Religion*, 113–152.

[8] Idem, 'New Age Movement', 370–371; see also idem, *New Age Religion*, 515–517; Hammer, *Knowledge*, 73–78.

[9] I here take von Stuckrad's definition of esotericism (*Esoterik*, 21) as truth-claims which engage in a 'dialectic of secrecy and concealment' about 'absolute knowledge'. See also idem, 'Western Esotericism', 88–93.

[10] Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 517–521.

[11] 'New Age religiosity is characterized by the double phenomenon of a psychologizing of religion combined with a sacralization of psychology' (idem, 'New Age Movement', 378) Jung 'not only psychologized esotericism but he also sacralized psychology, by filling it with the contents of esoteric speculation. The result was a body of theories which enabled people to talk about God while really meaning their own psyche, and about their own psyche while really meaning the divine […]' (idem, *New Age Religion*,

Agers consider themselves Jungians, the jargon of depth psychology is very common in New Age discourse.[12] As will quickly become clear, the *Gospel of Thomas* serves as an excellent foil in New Age discourse to polemicize against the designated "others" of mainstream religion and secularism and to inspire mystical speculation.

2. *The Fifth Gospel*[13]

The most explicitly New Age commentary on *Thomas* is Robert Winterhalter's *The Fifth Gospel: A Verse-by-Verse New Age Commentary on the* Gospel of Thomas. Winterhalter is president of the Society for the Study of Metaphysical Religion.[14] He has also served as a minister for the Unity School of Christianity,[15] whose founders were heavily influenced by a late nineteenth-century mélange of eastern mysticism, spiritualism, and New Thought.

For Winterhalter, 'the kingdom' of god, as expressed in logia 3 ('the kingdom is within us') and 113 ('the kingdom is already spread over the earth'), is *Thomas*' central topic: 'the Word of God, in the true sense, is also the kingdom of God that is within. Jesus meant that the kingdom is not a place, but a state of consciousness. The Cosmic Christ is omnipresent, and can be contacted anywhere'.[16] This psychologized mysticism dominates Winterhalter's exegesis, as for example in his commentary on logion 22:[17]

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513). See also Hammer, *Knowledge*, 67–70; Segal, 'Jung's Fascination', von Stuckrad, *Esoterik*, 220–223. For a Weberian analysis of the routinization of Jung's work into today's veritable "Jung Cult", see the analysis of Noll, *Jung Cult*, 275–297. For criticisms of Noll, see Hammer, *Knowledge*, 68 note 33, and esp. Shamdasani, *Cult Fictions*.

[12] In the interest of brevity I have only noted but not extrapolated on Jung's influence on the *Thomas* commentaries discussed below.

[13] For the reader's convenience I have in some cases included in notes the text of the *Thomas* logion being commented on (trans. Layton, *Scriptures*), or provided the headings given to each logion by Layton in his *Gnostic Scriptures*.

[14] http://websyte.com/alan/ssmr.htm (accessed 27 August 2006).

[15] www.unityworldhq.org (accessed 27 August 2006).

[16] Winterhalter, *Fifth Gospel*, 16; see also, on logion 113, ibid., 114.

[17] '[…] When you [plur.] make the two one and make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside and the above like the below, and that you might make the male and the female be one and the same, so that the male might not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye and a hand in place of a hand and a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image—then you will enter [the kingdom]'.

> The *new eyes* refer to an intuitive way of seeing. We awaken to the omnipresence of God, and give up bondage to our limiting beliefs about life [...] *The new hand* is a new way of working and achieving goals. We correct our thoughts, beliefs, images, and attitudes, instead of working to change only our surroundings. *The new foot* is a restored understanding. We let go of a false belief system, and welcome the intuitive knowledge of the Unity of Being.[18]

Winterhalter's seeker does not simply find self-actualization but through finding is transformed, empowered, and enabled. Such language is highly reminiscent of the kind of "positive thinking" which permeates New Age literature; elsewhere in his commentary, Winterhalter provides reinforcing maxims for his reader to affirm.[19]

The 'false belief system' replaced by 'intuitive knowledge' is not necessarily mainstream Christianity, but a generally weakened psychological state of self-doubt and unhappiness, as Winterhalter makes clear in his discussion of the famous logion 42 ('be passers-by'): 'the rendering, "Come into being as you pass away", accords well with Jesus' use of paradox. What passes away is a false belief system based on God's absence and our personal limitations. What replaces it is a growing awareness of our own status as God's unlimited Idea in an infinite universe'.[20] On the other hand, Winterhalter does frame his understanding of *Thomas*' cosmogony against '[m]odern and fundamentalist' readings of Genesis,[21] inclining toward the reading of several scholars that the light of the "kingdom of heaven" is that of Genesis 1, an ever-present

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[18] Ibid., 37.

[19] On logion 24: 'I relax, and realize the Inner Light of the Christ. I am the light of the world. I show forth the bright, shining light of the Indwelling God. I identify with the Inner Light and move and have my being within It. Through the Inner Light, I am healed, harmonized, and made whole' (ibid., 42) Cf. ibid., 64, on logion 50: 'We could say that the sign of our Father working within us is *a positive flow of ideas and images*' (italics author's).

[20] Winterhalter, *Fifth Gospel*, 56. Cf. ibid., 78–79, an exegesis of logia 68–69 ('the persecuted are blessed'; 'the internally persecuted and the compassionate are blessed'): 'the *Gospel of Thomas* points primarily to the inner sense of persecution. The problem is in our own belief system, not in other people'. Winterhalter employs the translation of Thomas O. Lambdin from Robinson's *NHLE*. Meyer, 'Be Passersby', 62–68, is a useful summary of the variegated approaches to translating the phrase.

[21] On logion 83 ('light is hidden by images'): 'the long-standing arguments between fundamentalists and modernists, as to the meaning of Genesis, have much to do with the timing of creation in the past. They have little or no relevance, however, to the mental and spiritual principles underlying God's creative action in the present [...] As such, these arguments have failed to address the central issues involved' (Winterhalter, *Fifth Gospel*, 91). De Conick (*Voices*, 92–98) reads the logion in terms of visionary ascent literature.

primordial being encountered in every place,[22] and, for Winterhalter, in consciousness especially.

Winterhalter also sets up his interpretation of *Thomas*' ethics in contrast to mainstream Christianity, as in his exegesis of logion 37 ('the disciples must strip off their garments'): 'he [Jesus] meant that it is possible to return to the state of oneness with God that the Garden of Eden symbolizes. To him, sin and guilt were not the permanent blots that later theologians believed'.[23] Christian ritual, too, is disparaged in favor of a praxis of positive thinking;[24] the fasting of logion 27 ('abstinence from the world') is considered 'mental'.[25]

Such a praxis also replaces the ascetic tendencies in *Thomas*.[26] Logion 29, which refers to the 'poverty of the body', is taken to mean that 'the visible world does not explain itself'.[27] Logion 56 ('the world is a corpse') is taken to mean that only the 'surface appearances' of the world are dead and meant to be seen past.[28] Winterhalter asserts that such ascetic statements must be an insertion of the 'Coptic editor with ascetic biases'.[29] Similarly, the (in)famous misogyny of Peter

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[22] Important passages discussing the 'kingdom' of light include logia 3, 49, and 113; see also 22, 27, 46, 82, 96–99, 107, 109, and 114. For analysis see Brown, 'Thomas', 170; Koester, *Gospels*, 117–118; Pagels, *Belief*, 50–51; Popkes, 'Ich bin', 660; and esp. Davies, 'Protology', and the monograph of Nordsieck, *Reich Gottes*.

[23] Winterhalter, *Fifth Gospel*, 52.

[24] On logion 53 ('true circumcision'): '"I am not bound by outer forms, rituals, and sacraments. I realize their inner meaning, which makes the outer form unnecessary. My baptism of water is to let the Holy Spirit cleanse, heal, and purify my soul [...] My baptism of fire is to let the Holy Spirit teach me all things and fully illumine me into its Truth. My Lord's Supper is to awaken to my divinity [...] My Eucharist is to realize that the whole universe is a great Eucharist, the body and blood of the Cosmic Christ, filled with the Light and Substance of the All-in-all' (ibid., 66). See also ibid., 20, on logion 6 ('true fasting, prayer, and charity'); ibid., 28–29, on logion 14 ('true fasting, prayer, and charity'); for a Jungian practice of visualizing Thomas' symbols see idem, *Parables*, 2–7.

[25] 'I mentally fast from all that is false; I think on all that is true of God's Omnipresence. I mentally fast from all that is evil; I think on all that is good. I mentally fast from all belief in disease; I celebrate Spirit's wholeness in myself and others. I mentally fast from all belief in lack; I celebrate Spirit's abundant supply in my life and in that of others' (idem, *Fifth Gospel*, 44).

[26] Agreeing with Valantasis' (*Thomas*) reading of Thomas as an ascetic 'perfomative theology'; see also King, *Mary*, 164; Quispel, 'l'ascèse chrétienne'; for Meyer and Pagels, see below.

[27] Winterhalter, *Fifth Gospel*, 46.

[28] Ibid., 68–69; see also ibid., 88, 95 on logia 80 ('the world is like the body'), 87 ('soul should be independent of body').

[29] Ibid., 69. See also, on logion 112 ('soul should be independent of flesh') ibid., 113–114: 'the couplet does not affirm a neurotic opposition of soul and body. Rather,

and Jesus in logion 114 ('the female element must make itself male') is dismissed because it does not accord with modern sensibilities of gender equality.[30]

Winterhalter's commentary is typically New Age in its concern with a psychologized mysticism attained through positive thinking. New Age optimism and holism lead him to reject ascetic tendencies in *Thomas* in favor of a praxis of daily affirmation of unity and positivity. Such an exegesis is framed against both rationalism and mainstream religion, but Winterhalter does not eschew mainstream Christianity entirely. His commentary is peppered with quotations from the *Gospel of John* and the *Odes of Solomon*. The title of his book, *The Fifth Gospel*, beckons the reader to accept *Thomas* as a gospel of equal stature to the canon, supplementing the latter with its 'metaphysical' teachings.[31] Nor does Winterhalter dub the teachings esoteric secrets reserved for a privileged few, even when commenting on *Thomas*' incipit. Nonetheless, Winterhalter discovers harmony and optimism in *Thomas* by contrasting it with Christian guilt, dogma, and hatred of the body, negotiating a New Age Christian identity in which Christianity's perceived flaws are rectified by a strong dose of wisdom teaching.

3. *Christian Zen*

Robert Powell is a co-founder of the Sophia Foundation of North America, a primarily anthroposophic organization which also incorporates theosophic, Buddhist, yogic, and "Gnostic" ideas, the latter being concerned with Sophia, the figure of divine feminine wisdom in classic Gnostic mythos.[32] He has written many books for the Foundation on subjects such as Sophia and the concept of the divine feminine, the

line 1 suggests the idea of healing the body through an inner change of consciousness. Line 2 implies that we are to welcome our intuitive awareness'.

[30] 'The statement attributed to Peter is fictional, and should be discounted' (ibid., 114. King, *Mary*, 147, agrees that it's probably tacked on by a scribe). 'Women and men are not to be in conflict, to complement one another. Members of both sexes share the capacity to grow both in reason and in intuition. Both, also, have the same dignity as the image of God, and share equal access to the kingdom' (Winterhalter, *Fifth Gospel*, 115).

[31] Ibid., 4.

[32] A handy introduction to anthroposophy can be found in van Egmond, 332–340.

tarot, astrology, and Christian mysticism.[33] Here I will focus on his *Christian Zen: The Essential Teachings of Jesus Christ.*

The concept of non-duality is the center of Powell's exegesis of *Thomas*: 'with the proper magical key, we find in Jesus' Sayings [in *Thomas*] a most beautiful presentation of the timeless teaching of *Advaita* (non-duality), the esoteric expression of the inner meaning of all the great religions'.[34] In this brief statement we discern several distinctly New Age characteristics: holistic ontology, appropriation of distinctly eastern terminology, and belief in the perennial philosophy, an esoteric teaching embedded in all the great religious traditions.[35] As Powell elaborates, *advaita* is understood in the context of self-discovery:

> The core of the teaching and the essence of what Jesus Christ in himself represents revolve around the question of man's real identity [...] All things are necessarily reduced to an intangible "no-thingness", which is their ultimate and only Self-identity. This experiencing of the ultimate Emptiness of all relative things (their No-thingness) is at once the re-affirmation of one's absolute Being—birthless and deathless.[36]

While Powell asserts that this teaching was a secret in Jesus' circle, he advocates proselytizing it openly and removing it from the domain of the elite, even if few will be capable of understanding it.[37]

One of Jesus' terms is particularly important: 'the kingdom (of the father)', 'by which is meant simply the Truth, the Ultimate Reality, or the transcendental Self'.[38] Unlike in the Synoptic Gospels, 'the kingdom is not at all a physical state; it is transcendental and therefore not limited in space-time. It has nothing to do with ordinary sense perception; it is Self-realization'.[39] The kingdom is discovered through 'seeking and finding', as logion 3 makes clear:

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[33] See bibliography.

[34] Powell, *Zen*, vii. 'Why do I use a term such as *advaita* which is so relatively obscure, at least in the West? [...] Perhaps the nearest Western term is "holistic," but even this does not cover it entirely [...]' (ibid., viii).

[35] For discussions of *philosophia perennis* and esoteric truth-claims in modern esoteric circles see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 400, 449, 468–470; Hammer, *Knowledge*, 170–176; von Stuckrad, *Esoterik*, 219–220.

[36] Powell, *Zen*, xi; similar comparisons of Gnostic self-discovery to Buddhist awakening can be found in Arnold; Conze, esp. 174 and 182; Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 178–181; O'Neill, esp. 193, 196.

[37] Ibid., xii. Cf. his exegesis of logia 62, 73, 74, and 93 (ibid., 60, 69–70, 84).

[38] Ibid., xiii.

[39] Ibid., 105, on logion 113.

> once you start looking within and understand what you observe, you will transcend space and time and experience a reality in which nothing ever happens. The Kingdom does not lie away from you but in fact is your very Self. Then the phrases "within you" and "outside you" will lose any meaning they might have had.[40]

Thomas' Jesus offers transcendence.

The motif of light, central to *Thomas*' theology of the kingdom of heaven, is also considered by Powell to describe the process of self-discovery. On logion 24: 'The light that Jesus talks about is no ordinary physical light; he is referring to the Ultimate Light, that of the Self, without which no other kind of light could be observed'.[41] Logion 83 ('light is hidden by images'), one of the more obscure of the Gospel's sayings, is interpreted similarly: 'The "images" are the manifest objects perceived—the realm of Objectivity—and "the Light which is within them" is the Subjectivity. The Self, the Unmanifest, remains unrealized so long as we are held by the various sense objects'.[42] Like Winterhalter and many *Thomas* scholars, Powell reads the kingdom of light as ultimate mystical unity. But instead of taking this unity to be that described in Genesis 1, Powell sees it as something that is better described with eastern terminology. Moreover, Powell psychologizes the discovery of non-duality as 'self-realization'.[43]

Like Winterhalter, Powell is wary of assigning a ritual or moral praxis to the process of self-discovery, and finds in *Thomas* ample indications that Jesus would have agreed. In his exegesis of logion 14, 'Jesus admonishes his disciples that mental fasting is much more important than physical fasting'.[44] Rather, one's approach to daily living is more important; on logion 6: 'he [Jesus] […] just tells them [the disciples] to live a natural, straightforward life, to be honest with themselves and others, and to trust in their innate wisdom. In the course of such a life all the truly important things will be revealed'.[45]

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[40] Ibid., 5.

[41] Ibid., 25. See also, on logia 50 and 61, ibid., 49, 59.

[42] Ibid., 79.

[43] Logion 2 'describes the various stages of self-realization' (ibid., 4). Logion 70: 'Only through Self-knowledge can one come to Self-realization. Without that Self-knowledge you will unfailingly perish spiritually' (ibid., 66; see also logia 67, 77, 92, 94, in ibid., 64, 73, 86, 88).

[44] Ibid., 14; see also nigh-identical commentary on logion 27 (ibid., 28).

[45] Ibid., 8. Cf. the interpretation of logion 53 ('true circumcision'): 'nature teaches us that there is nothing wrong with the uncircumcised state, which is our 'given' […] Secondly, we have not yet reached our natural state in the spiritual sense. The true

Dualistic sayings that seem to presume a strongly ascetic lifestyle are explained away. Confronted with logion 29 ('the poverty of the body'), Powell remarks, 'it would be even more remarkable if the mind were the product of body or matter (as is still the thinking of many scientists today)'.[46] Logion 87[47] is taken to mean that 'both body and mind are unreal and [...] one must find the real Self, which is neither "body" or [sic] "mind"'.[48] However, Powell's Jesus does remind seekers to remain relatively austere.[49] Logion 114 ('the female element must make itself male') is excised entirely from the commentary, without even a mention.

Powell's commentary is very similar to Winterhalter's in its espousal of New Age holism, its psychologizing, and its rejection of the dualistic and ascetic aspects of *Thomas*. Instead of emphasizing positive thinking, however, Powell is more concerned with 'self-realization' of 'non-duality' (*advaita*), the ultimate experience of being. Powell's Jesus is not a teacher of New Thought, or even (as his book's title suggests) a Zen Buddhist, but a mystic. Like Winterhalter, Powell refers to Jesus' teachings as the *philosophia perennis*, but does not develop the idea.

Of the commentaries treated here, Powell's is by far the least polemical. However, his exegesis is significant to us insofar as it underscores the extreme concern with holism in New Age thought and the discomfort of our New Age exegetes with *Thomas*' ascetic passages. Moreover, he constructs a religious identity which consistently departs from contemporary mainstream Christian interests: the kingdom of God is not eschatological but omnipresent; ascetic practice is not physical but mental; divine presence is secularized into a frame of mind.

4. *The Gospel of Peace*

Our third *Thomas* commentary is *The Gospel of Peace*, by Michio Kushi, a devotee of the philosophy developed by the Japanese author George

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circumcision is that of the transformation in spirit and is infinitely more important and beneficial than any physical change could be' (ibid., 52).

[46] Ibid., 30.

[47] 'Jesus said, "Wretched is the body that depends upon a body. And wretched is the soul that depends upon these two"'.

[48] Powell, *Zen*, 82; see also logia 56, 80, 112, in ibid., 55, 76, 104.

[49] In logion 36 ('what you wear'), 'Jesus reminds his disciples not to fret about trivialities', i.e., being materialistic (Powell, *Zen*, 35; see also ibid., 36, 41, 53, 102, on sayings 35, 42, 54, 110).

Ohsawa. Ohsawa, Kushi tells us, argued that the universe's microcosm is a logarithmic spiral, which is eternally animated by the dynamic interaction between yin and yang.[50] All characteristics (male, female; future, past; dark, light; etc.) can be reduced to the dualism of yin and yang, harmonized in the movement of the spirals in every thing.[51] The way in which an individual can be attuned to the spiral, is to control one's diet precisely by 'eating very simply, usually just whole grain as principal food, with some beans and vegetables, and some fish occasionally and very little fruit'.[52]

Kushi argues that the founders of 'all the world's religions and philosophies' strictly adhered to this diet, and that their 'true teachings' may be discovered by following it;[53] again, we find the notion of a perennial philosophy, corrupted by religious institutional sectarianism.[54] *Thomas*, Kushi says, 'was based on the unifying principle of macrobiotics—and understanding of the infinite Order of the Universe [...] the Kingdom of God'. It is not only 'the deepest, most authentic expression of Jesus' teachings',[55] it is also the oldest; Kushi cites Koester's assertion that '*The Gospel of Thomas* almost always appears to have preserved a more original form of the traditional saying [...]'.[56]

Another difference between Kushi's interpretation of *Thomas* and those discussed above is that Kushi does not see the motif of "seeking and finding" as individualistic, psychologized self-realization. Rather, introversion is deemphasized while more concern is placed on the experience of "finding" truth after adopting a macrobiotic diet,[57] becoming acquainted with 'the kingdom of heaven'. Like Winterhalter, Kushi

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[50] Kushi & Jack, *Gospel of Peace*, 6–7, 20–22, 167–180; ibid., 21–29 is a uniquely macrobiotic exegesis of Judeo-Christian history; see also, within the discussions of sayings in *Thomas*, ibid., 36–38, 57–59, 82–89, 123–124, 126–130, 133–136, 139–140.

[51] Ibid., 22.

[52] Ibid., 9.

[53] Ibid., 7, 9.

[54] Kushi is quite explicit: 'throughout the ages, teachers of life have appeared to guide humanity to higher levels of consciousness and judgment. They have helped people to relieve their suffering and to enter a larger life of health, happiness and peace. However, their teachings have often been lost, altered, or misunderstood. Over the centuries, great religions have been founded in their names. These, in turn, have splintered into rival denominations and sects [...] So much has been added, subtracted, or changed that it is very difficult today to hear the true voice of Jesus or Buddha' (ibid., 7).

[55] Ibid., 8.

[56] Koester, *Gospels*, 85, in Kushi & Jack, *Gospel of Peace*, 18.

[57] Ibid., 34–35 on logia 1–2 ('obscure sayings', 'seek until you find'); see also ibid., 138, 152–154, on logia 92, 108.

disparages 'the teaching of the churches' for thinking of the kingdom of heaven eschatologically and/or politically. Rather, the kingdom is knowledge of origins, or rather, of presence in the "order" that is "everywhere" and "encompasses everything" ';[58] 'the New Age is here and has been here all the time'.[59] It is also interesting to note that the 'kingdom of heaven' is not seen by Kushi—as it is by Winterhalter, Powell, and many scholars—as the meeting of the beginning and the end in Genesis, but as the ethics of non-action made possible through proper diet.[60]

Dualistic and/or "Gnostic" inclinations in *Thomas* are easily accommodated within Kushi's worldview, which acknowledges dualism in yin and yang but ultimately fuses them into infinite unity.[61] More interestingly he often acknowledges that 'from a more modern view, everything appears to be random, chaotic, and unjust'.[62] Theodicy is not much of an issue for Kushi, but unlike the commentaries of Powell and Winterhalter, the question of evil—and the interest of the early Gnostics in this problem[63]—is of some interest to him.

More anthropologically dualistic passages that might presume an ascetic ethic are also taken holistically.[64] But Kushi recommends a lifestyle that, while not quite ascetic, is certainly disciplined. As mentioned in the above, the center of the macrobiotic life is proper diet[65] and proper attention to 'life and its infinite order' instead of trivialities.[66] The thief of logion 21b can be seen as anything ranging from love of

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[58] Ibid., 36, on logion 3 ('the kingdom is within us'); see also ibid., 62–63, 75, 161–163, on logia 23–24, 37, 113.

[59] Ibid., 93, on logion 50.

[60] Ibid., 51–52, 61–62, 97–100,140–143, on logia 18 ('the end is where the beginning is'), 22 ('those who enter the kingdom resemble little ones'), 57–58, 98 ('a parable of an assassination').

[61] Ibid., 44–45 on logion 11 ('the living will not die'). See also ibid., 80–81 on logion 43.

[62] Ibid., 57, 95–96, 112–113, on logia 19 ('the preexistent is blessed'), 54 ('the poor'), 68 ('the persecuted are blessed').

[63] Ibid., 16–17.

[64] On logion 29 ('independence of spirit and body'): 'many people think that the body is not important or that food is not important. They seek only the soul […] [But] through proper care of the body […] we make our way back to the spiritual world' (ibid., 68). See also ibid., 124–125, 132–133, 160–161, on logia 80 ('the world is like the body'), 87 ('wretched is the body'), and 112 ('soul should be independent of flesh').

[65] Ibid., 37, on logion 4.

[66] Ibid., 42 on logion 8 ('a parable of an intelligent fisherman'); see also ibid., 155–156, on logion 110.

power or wealth to ice cream and tofu cheesecake.[67] Other practices, such as physiognomy (the analysis of personality via the study of a person's face), are so powerful when combined with a macrobiotic diet that they were interpreted as miracles by the New Testament authors.[68] Like Winterhalter and Powell, Kushi thinks that Jesus wants us to be honest with ourselves about our desires and needs when he tells us in logion 5: 'do not lie, and do not do what you hate'.[69] Jesus' recommendations not to fast or pray is 'teaching people real freedom [...] [which] is play, not work or sacrifice'.[70] This is the meaning of Jesus' injunction in logion 42, 'be passers-by'.[71]

Kushi juxtaposes *Thomas*' universalism to mainstream Christianity in a highly polemical fashion. Jesus, *Thomas* teaches, 'is not the only son of God. That was misunderstood by the later Church'.[72] In Logion 12 ('the disciples will come to James'), Kushi takes James as the everyman, so that 'everyone is a son or daughter of God or One Infinity'.[73] The intolerant Church of Simon Peter and Matthew, who misunderstood Jesus in logion 13 ('the disciples tell Jesus what he resembles'), 'made Jesus a savior and made the people to be sinners [...] Over the centuries millions of people died by fire or stoning for affirming their unity with the infinite source'.[74] While 'seeking and finding' in particular is not contrasted by Kushi with the sectarian moralism of institutional Christianity (as it is by Powell and Winterhalter), Kushi's understanding of personal, peaceful mysticism is unambiguously set against mainstream Christian teaching. At the same time 'the Pharisees and Scribes [logion 39] of our own day are scholars, scientists, doctors, and lawyers', those who enforce the unhealthy codes and bad medicine of secular society.[75] When Jesus says in logion 56 that the world is a

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[67] Ibid., 59–60, on logion 21b; see also ibid., 63–66, 73–75, on logia 25–27, 35–36.

[68] Ibid., 38–39, on logion 5; the present author knows of no evidence to substantiate his claim that Jesus practiced physiognomy.

[69] Ibid., 39.

[70] Ibid., 40. See also ibid., 47–48, 136, 147–148, on logia 14 ('true fasting, prayer, and charity'), 89, 104.

[71] Ibid., 79.

[72] Ibid., 37, on logion 3 ('the kingdom is within us').

[73] Ibid., 46 on logion 12; see also ibid., 88, 96–97, 105–106, on logia 47, 55, 63.

[74] Ibid., 47, on logion 13; see also ibid., 100, 156–160, on logia 58, 111. The exegesis of logion 69 (ibid., 113–116) attacks western conceptions of sin and guilt at length.

[75] Ibid., 76–77, on logion 39; see also ibid., 88, 110, 146–147, on logia, 47, 65, 102 ('Pharisees impede nourishment').

corpse, he refers to the world of 'religion, politics, science, education, and other institutions'.[76]

Kushi's macrobiotic exegesis is without parallel. Almost every page of his commentary is concerned with transformation of health through diet and discussion of the 'spiralinear' order of things. Indeed, Kushi finds these ideas in some of *Thomas*' most obscure logia.[77] Like Powell and Winterhalter, Kushi maintains that Jesus' wisdom was once secret but is now available to all. He says that 'the teachings of eternal truth are available to everyone. There are no miracles, no secrets'.[78] The macrobiotic way of life is imbued with the infinite, but it is no mystery. Rather it is discussed very openly and at great length, although very few are interested or even capable of understanding it.[79]

In sum, *Thomas*' mystical and pedagogical features are extremely attractive to New Age exegetes. The focus on "seeking and finding" is easily collapsed into a New Age sensibility of psychological self-fulfillment via introspection and discovery of mystical, holistic unity. Thus logia 2, 3, 92, and 108 play important roles in New Age exegeses of *Thomas*, and nearly all other logia are interpreted under this rubric. This interpretation of "seeking and finding" is not much different from those of most scholars.[80]

Equally interesting is the fact that each New Age reader ignores or explains away the ascetic tendencies in *Thomas*, and replaces them with typically New Age holistic conceptions wherein body and mind are entirely integrated and ascetic practices (chastity, fasting, etc.) are rejected.[81] Logia 6, 14, 36, and 37 are especially important for interpreting *Thomas* in this way. Similarly, the infamous logion 114 ('the female

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[76] Ibid., 97.

[77] Logion 7 ('the lion and the human being') is about the evolution of the seven grades of creatures and foods on 'the spiral of evolution' (ibid., 40–42). Logion 26 ('Jesus has come to impose divisions') is concerned with the five elements and/or family members in the *I Ching* (ibid., 49). The five trees of paradise in logion 19 are five stages of the spiralinear transformation of energy (ibid., 52–57). For academic discussions of logion 7 see Davies, *Thomas*, 8; Jackson, *Lion*; Grant, *Secret Sayings*, 126; Nordsieck, *Thomas-Evangelium*, 51–52; for 19, see Davies, *Thomas*, 26; Meyer, *Thomas*, 77–78; Grant, *Secret Sayings*, 139; Nordsieck, *Thomas-Evangelium*, 93–95.

[78] Ibid., 92–93, on logion 62 ('Jesus tells his secrets to the worthy').

[79] Ibid., 120, 138, on logia 75 ('solitaries will enter the bridal chamber'), 93 ('do not give the holy to dogs').

[80] Discussions include (but are not limited to) Attridge, '"Seeking and Finding"'; Davies, *Thomas*, 2, 50; Zöckler, *Jesu Lehren*, 185–186; Valantasis, *Thomas*, 114–115.

[81] See also Hanegraaff, 'New Age Movement', 373–374.

element must make itself male') is also explained away (Kushi),[82] is rejected as inauthentic (Winterhalter), or removed from the text entirely (Powell), its misogyny being incompatible with the feminism popular in New Age circles.[83] Any trace of cosmic dualism in *Thomas*[84] is ignored in favor of typical New Age optimism and holism.

Finally, self-actualization is rhetorically contrasted with intolerant and dogmatic mainstream religion, as well as with superficial, nihilistic secular life. Even in Kushi's analysis, which eschews an exegesis of "seeking and finding", individual spiritual achievement is glorified while organized religion is portrayed as blind and bloody, and secular (especially medical) institutions are excoriated. The teaching of the institution is rejected in favor of Jesus' mystical 'secret teachings', identified as such by *Thomas*' incipit. There is much precedence for this polemic regarding esoteric Christian mysticism in twentieth-century theosophical and anthroposophical texts,[85] and here we see these same currents at work mixed with more recent Jungian and New Age themes. Some sayings,

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[82] For Kushi the logion shows that Jesus understood that women are excessively yin (intuitive) and men excessively yang (analytical/logical), and that both must learn from each other to achieve true balance (Kushi & Jack, *Gospel of Peace*, 163–165).

[83] As Hanegraaff (*New Age Religion*, 89) argues, women's spirituality in the New Age is heavily influenced by (but not limited to) American feminist Wicca and "goddess" movements, for extended analysis of which see Hutton, *Moon*, 340–361. The logion lends itself to a myriad of scholarly interpretations as well, including the following: Meyer ('Making Mary Male') argues that the logion is best contextualized in early Judeo-Christian asceticism and misogyny; see also Gärtner (*Theology*, 255) for Gnostic misogyny. Davies (*Thomas*, 138) points out its conflict with logion 22; De Konick (*Seek*, 22) sees Platonic androgyny. For an extensive survey of the secondary literature, see Nordsieck, *Thomas-Evangelium*, 384–390.

[84] Thomas constantly uses the language of light to contrast divinity with the darkness of the world, as in logia 4, 11, 37, 49, 50, 77, 83–85, but esp. 18. While some contest that the *Gospel of John* serves as *Thomas*' source of light/dark dualism (Brown, 'Thomas', 161, 165, esp. 176–177; Gärtner, *Theology*, 144–148, 201–210; more recently and on the grounds of the Greek fragments of *Thomas*, Popkes, 'Ich bin', 674), others (Pagels, 'Genesis', 479–488; idem, *Belief*, 51, 55–56; Davies, *Thomas*, 24; Nordsieck, *Thomas-Evangelium*, 92; idem, *Reich Gottes*, 205; Funk, et al., *Five Gospels*, 483–484) take the sayings as Gnostic, and Nordsieck (*Thomas-Evangelium*, 92) considers the possibility. Still others perceive *Thomas*' light mysticism as drawing from a more general first-century Jewish sapiential milieu (detailed especially in Boyarin, 'Gospel of the Memra'; see also the discussions by Brown, *John*, CXXII–CXXV, 519–524; Dodd, *Fourth Gospel*, 84–86, 202, 204–208; Pagels, *Belief*, 51–55). For meditations on Hellenistic light-mysticism see Bultmann, 'Lichtsymbolik'; Dodd, *Fourth Gospel*, esp. 17–19, 36–44, 55–56, 66–73, 201–204.

[85] For an indispensable survey of which see Hammer, *Knowledge*, 147–154. As Hammer points out (ibid., 175) esoteric perennial philosophy often 'sees mysticism as [its] underlying core […] [Its] negative Other is organized religion'.

such as logion 50, are interpreted in this context even when scholarship is occupied with entirely different issues.[86] This 'peripheral wisdom' is ambiguous (per Fernandez) insofar as these commentators promise to vanquish all boundaries—political, sexual, religious—but draw up new boundaries instead, around demonized "centers" of intolerant Christianity and spiritually empty secular culture. These New Age polemicists, paradoxically, affirm their own peacefulness and disinclination to polemicize whilst they excoriate their perceived "others".

5. *Neognosticism and Thomas*

It is ironic that the issue of individuals labeling themselves "Gnostic" in antiquity has been the subject of heated debate,[87] while very little interest is shown in those who take up the mantle "Gnostic" today.[88] Although the "Neognostics"[89] deserve sustained study, I will here limit myself to exploring two Neognostic interpretations of *Thomas*; those of Stephen Hoeller, bishop of the Ecclesia Gnostica in Los Angeles, and Christian Amundsen, an independent Neognostic author. These interpretations, as will become evident, are actually quite similar to those described in the New Age commentaries discussed above, as Neognostic thought, though eschewing the label 'New Age', appears to espouse typical New Age ideas and draw from the usual New Age sources (i.e. theosophy, Jungianism, New Thought).

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[86] Koester (*Gospels*, 125–126), Fallon and Cameron ('Forschungsbericht', 4231), Kloppenborg et al. (*Reader*, 96–97), Meyer (*Thomas*, 12, 89–90), Popkes ('Ich bin', 659), and Zöckler (*Jesu Lehren*, 124) consider this saying strong evidence of some kind of Gnostic background in Thomas. De Conick (*Seek*, 38–39) argues for Jewish ascent mysticism. Davies argues that it is not cosmological but eschatological (Davies, 'Protology', 672–674; with Valantasis, *Thomas*, 127–129). Nordsieck (*Thomas-Evangelium*, 202–206) discusses all these possibilities without conclusion, perhaps most sympathetically to Davies.

[87] The best available survey of the relevant sources is M. Smith, 'Gnostikos'; see also Layton, 'Prolegomena', idem, *Scriptures*, 5, 8; Williams, *Rethinking*, 31–43.

[88] The only available study is R. Smith, 'Revival'. Idem, 'Afterword', Filoramo, 'Modern Culture', and Perkins, 'Modern Spirit', 205–217, are all important contributions to the study of Gnosticism's relevance to modern philosophy and literature.

[89] I use the term "Neognostic" to describe those who, post-Nag Hammadi, refer to themselves as Gnostics and claim the treatises discovered at Nag Hammadi and/or reported by the heresiologists as their scriptures. Gnostic materials have certainly been appropriated in prior, related currents (such as theosophy, illuminism, or Jungianism), but without the enormous weight given to Gnostic texts, as so few were available before the Nag Hammadi discoveries. These earlier currents are commonly designated "esoteric" in present scholarship, as in van den Broek & Hanegraaff, *Gnosis and Hermetism*; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*; Hammer, *Knowledge*; von Stuckrad, *Esoterik*.

Having published literally dozens of lectures, articles, and books, Stephan Hoeller is easily the most prolific (if repetitive) commentator on *Thomas* and Gnosticism outside the academy. His Ecclesia Gnostica, with churches in Los Angeles, Portland, Salt Lake City, and Oslo, is one of the larger organizations of Neognostics,[90] and its website is the largest and most comprehensive site on Gnosticism on the web,[91] including multiple translations of various Nag Hammadi tractates,[92] a bookstore featuring Hoeller's work and enthusiastic recommendations of popular scholarship on Gnosticism.[93]

In 1958, Stephan Hoeller joined the Los Angeles Theosophists and Liberal Catholics (who at the time were the sole organizers of small neognostic groups in the U.S.) and was ordained a priest in an associated Gnostic Society. Although consecrated Bishop in the Order of the Pleroma by Ronald Powell (aka Richard, Duc de Palatine) he split with Powell in 1970 and founded the Ecclesia Gnostica.[94] His early days with liberal Catholics and theosophists, who commonly drew from Catholic liturgy in their ritual, heavily influenced both his thought and practice, although he is no longer formally associated with Liberal Catholicism. In addition to Gnosticism, Hoeller writes about kabbalah, tarot, and alchemy, always from a Jungian perspective. As Richard Smith writes, 'modern Gnosticism, for Hoeller and his group, *is* Jungian psychology'.[95] Jung, to Hoeller, is 'a modern Gnostic master who offers contemporary

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[90] The Asociación Gnostica de Estudios Anthropologicos y Culturales, founded in 1962 by Samael Aun Weor, claims to have the most members of any Neognostic organization—at least eight million (Smith, 'Revival', 210–211). Weor's philosophy draws quite a bit from Blavatsky and perhaps Crowley, with its talk of sex magic, astral travel, seven root races and seven sub-races, etc. (ibid., 211–212). The Asociación Gnostica does not receive further treatment here because, in the knowledge of the author, Weor and his followers have not written commentaries on *Thomas* (or any Nag Hammadi document, for that matter).

[91] www.gnosis.org/ecclesia/ecclesia.htm (accessed 27 August 2006).

[92] Robinson's *NHLE*, Layton's *Scriptures*, and Meyer/Barnstone's *Bible* are all featured.

[93] The books of Karen King, Elaine Pagels, and Marvin Meyer are preeminent.

[94] R. Smith, 'Revival', 206–207. Compare with the party line from the Ecclesia Gnostica website: it 'was organized as the Pre-Nicene Gnostic Catholic Church at first in England and since 1959 in the United States by the late Bishop Richard, Duc de Palatine. After the demise of the Duc de Palatine in the 1970's, the Church he established in America continued its work under the name Ecclesia Gnostica. The Regionary Bishop of the church is Dr. Stephan A. Hoeller, who was consecrated to that office by the Duc de Palatine in 1967. Dr. Hoeller is thus the senior holder of what is sometimes called the English Gnostic Transmission in America'.

[95] R. Smith, 'Revival', 207.

perspectives applicable to the ancient myths and teachings, and who makes his own remarkable contribution to Gnosticism'.[96]

It might, at first, seem surprising that Hoeller has written on *Thomas*; his books and articles mostly discuss Gnosticism from a Jungian perspective, and draw from the sources of the heresiologists much more extensively than on the Nag Hammadi texts.[97] In his most recent book, an introduction to Gnosticism, very little is said of *Thomas*. Nonetheless, he remarks on his website that 'the *Gospel of Thomas* is awakening interest in a forgotten spiritual legacy of Christian culture. The *incipit* (or "beginning words") of Thomas invite each of us "who has ears to hear" to join in a unique quest [...]'.[98] There is no question for Hoeller that *Thomas* is a Gnostic gospel. Scholars, he says, have been thrown off by its genre of sayings gospel, focusing not on narrative but on Jesus' words. *Thomas*' genre is not at all similar to other books of *logoi sophōn* (like Q),[99] nor to the New Testament gospels, which occupy themselves with Jesus' earthly existence; *Thomas* is simply concerned with Gnostic teaching.[100]

In the 'other gospels', Hoeller argues, Jesus promulgates both secret teachings (gnosis) and ritual (hierophany), initiating the reader in the same way he initiates Thomas in logion 13.[101] Jesus' teaching, of course, is to actualize the self by practicing depth psychology to achieve a state of individuation and wholeness similar to the states described by the New Age exegetes discussed above, although phrased much more explicitly in psychological terms. Logion 89 ('we should wash not only the outside') describes how 'the ultimate objective envisioned by the Gnostic is [...] the integration of the dichotomy of personal versus transpersonal into an abiding condition of wholeness'.[102] Logion 2 ['seek

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[96] Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 173 (he makes the comment in the context of defending Jung from the studies of Noll, *Jung Cult*, and Segal, *Gnostic Jung*; see also the introduction to Jung as savior of western spirituality in his *Jung*, 1–11; also idem, 'Jung and Alchemical Revival'. Hoeller's first book is an exegesis of Jung's *Septem Sermones ad Mortem*.

[97] Even before the publication of the *NHLE*, Hoeller felt as though he and his group knew more than enough about Gnosticism to practice it. (Dart, 'L. A. Gnostics', B2).

[98] www.gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl_thomas.htm (accessed 27 August 2006).

[99] As famously proposed by Robinson, 'LOGOI SOPHON'.

[100] Hoeller, *Jung*, 186–187. See also the very brief discussion of *Thomas* in idem, *Gnosticism*, 200–201.

[101] Idem, *Jung*, 193; see also ibid., 187, 195 (on logion 108), and idem, *Gnosticism*, 189. Hoeller explicates the *Gospel of Philip* as Jesus' ritualistic mysteries in idem, *Jung*, 204–214, and systematizes Gnostic rituals in idem, *Gnosticism*, 81–92.

[102] Idem, *Jung*, 192.

until you find'] refers to 'the awakening to the need for inner meaning; by persistence the success of the search is assured; and "finding" signifies the awareness of the growth of consciousness',[103] 'the heavenly kingdom [logion 3] of meaning and individuation'.[104] That such individuation might be initially disturbing, as logion 2 says, indicates Jesus' great insight into the principles of depth psychology.[105]

Like our New Age commentators, Hoeller eschews Gnostic dualism for holism, even though his interpretation of Gnosticism relies very heavily on the "classic Gnostic myths" of the heresiologists and the Sethian texts discovered at Nag Hammadi, which are variously dualistic and generally esteem spirit over body.[106] Hoeller considers the problem of theodicy to be at the heart of Gnostic myth and accepts the Gnostic cliché of 'anti-cosmism'.[107] He argues for a 'qualified dualism' or 'objective idealism', and finds this holistic cosmology in *Thomas*. Logion 29 ('independence of spirit and body') is taken to mean that 'pure materialism and pure idealism are both rejected [...] It is surely incumbent on us to undergo a transformational process of Gnosis'.[108] More focused on Gnostic myths than the New Age commentators, however, Hoeller emphasizes that humankind nonetheless feels alienated in the world and that this is appropriate, indeed, the meaning of logion 42 ('be passers-by').[109] He even advises readers not to esteem physical generation too highly.[110]

Nonetheless, the faults of the cosmos do not require us to practice any kind of asceticism or self-denial;[111] rather, we are to avoid becoming absorbed in secular worldliness, 'the modern and postmodern myopia' of 'consumerism and hedonism—the worship of money, health, and youthfulness'.[112] Equally important is that we reject Judeo-Christian

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[103] Ibid., 196.
[104] Ibid., 197.
[105] Ibid., 196, on logia 2, 67, 70, and 111.
[106] But see also the qualifications of Williams, *Rethinking*, 97–101, 113–115.
[107] Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 71–78. R. Smith ('Revival', 209) recognizes Hoeller's holistic metaphysics; see also idem, *Jung*, 193.
[108] Ibid., 188.
[109] Loc. cit.
[110] 'The mere physical role of giving birth and nourishing has limited value' (ibid., 189, on logion 79).
[111] See also Smith, 'Revival', 208.
[112] Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 78. See also idem, *Jung*, 189, on logion 63: 'The Gnostic ought not to waste an over-amount of his psychic force on the personalistic pursuits of life'; ibid., 190, on logion 97: 'Life in the world can imperceptibly rob us of our innate spiritual treasure'.

ethics. Like the New Age commentators, Hoeller takes *Thomas*' sayings about fasting and other ascetic practices to indicate that 'an honest relationship with one's inner being is more important than the following of outer rules',[113] adding a nihilistic flair by asserting Jung's doctrine of the transcendence of moral obligation for those who have plumbed the depths of *coincidentia oppositorum*.[114]

Clearly, the substance of Hoeller's commentary is suffused with New Age concerns, values, interests, and terminology. What differentiates his commentary from those discussed above is how he frames his identity as a Neognostic and those against whom he orients himself polemically. Like the New Age writers, Hoeller fulminates against the spiritual emptiness of modern secular culture; yet he is far softer on contemporary Christendom, extending his critique of ideology to political movements as well as churches.[115]

Hoeller also engages competing esoteric groups head-on, unlike the New Age commentators. He argues that Gnosticism, with its proliferation of aeons upon aeons, is a form of polytheism and hence less beholden to the intolerant impulses of monotheism,[116] yet disparages the Wiccan feminist narrative of the fall of peaceful matriarchy to the holocaust of patriarchal monotheism.[117] He quotes Aleister Crowley,[118] the (in)famous British magician and founder of Thelema, but calls on Gnostics to reject association with Thelemites, Crowley's followers.[119]

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[113] Jung, 191, on logion 6.

[114] 'Safe rules and commandments become hindrances to those who, having spiritually outgrown them, are ready for Gnosis' (Hoeller, *Jung*, 200). Logion 14 can be interpreted as the 'emphasis in Jung's psychology on the need for the individual to discover his or her own internally authenticated moral code' (ibid., on logion 14).

[115] Hoeller, *Jung*, 7–8.

[116] Idem, 'Goddesses'.

[117] 'Nor has the fall of our culture come about by the eclipse of a benign matriarchy and its replacement by a malign patriarchy, which condition we are told might be remedied by a restored matriarchy presided over by a rehabilitated chthonic Goddess' (Hoeller, *Jung*, 10). For incisive but sympathetic critique of the 'witches' holocaust' mythos, see Hutton, *Moon*, 342–343.

[118] 'Our watchword in these (moral) matters must never be "I want," but rather "do as Thou wilt"' (Hoeller, 'Goddesses').

[119] 'It is almost needless to emphasize that this mythos [of the *Book of the Law*] is unacceptable to any Gnostic who takes his inspiration even in part from the authentic scriptures of the ancient Gnostics, or to any person who has an affinity for the sacraments of the catholic mythos, which are all based on the mysterious and majestic figure of the Christ. With all due respect to Aleister Crowley, we as custodians of this certain tradition of the Christian Gnosis are by no means willing to substitute Baphomet—Therion—Perdurabo—Crowley for the figure of the Christ!' (Hoeller, 'Position Paper').

In constructing his own place in tradition, he understands the 'descendents' of the ancient Gnostics to be 'monastic Christian mystics [...] alchemists, ceremonial magicians, Cathars, Rosicrucians, Kabbalists, and in modern times Theosophists and related movements of alternative spirituality', even drawing on Frances Yates' work to designate these movements the spiritual counterculture of the West,[120] of which he is an heir. Hoeller thus negotiates a complex of identities in which he places himself as "Other" in reference to mainstream Christian and secular culture in a way reminiscent of New Age writers, yet drawing on a Christian identity by focusing on Christian symbols and rituals in his Jungian exegeses.

Independent of Hoeller is the work of Christian Amundsen, who has composed a general introduction to Gnosticism (*Illumination*) as well as a *Thomas* commentary, which bears the endorsement of the famous scholar of Gnosticism and *Thomas*, Elaine Pagels.[121] Amundsen describes himself as a once-aspiring minister who acquired his M. Div. but became increasingly bothered by the problem of theodicy, finding the issue best addressed in Gnostic texts, especially *Thomas*.[122] Although he says he does not believe that the "classic Gnostic myth" literally transpired as described in the texts, he distills it down to a list of nine Gnostic noble truths.[123]

Classic Gnostic cosmic pessimism leads Amundsen to declare the world a 'death machine'.[124] He sees the process of living and dying as absurd, a 'wretched process': 'We spend our time trying not to expose ourselves to forces that can "eat" us, but in the end, we cannot live without that exposure [...] Yes, [the world] is awesome and vast. Yes, it is beautiful and wondrous, but is not a good place at all—dangerous and deadly'.[125] *Thomas* logion 56 ('the world is a corpse') is highlighted as an example of *Thomas*' Gnostic dualism.[126]

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[120] Hoeller, *Jung*, 4; expanded to a chapter with special focus on theosophy and Jung in idem, *Gnosticism*, 155–173. 'Authentic' Gnostic religions besides those of Valentinus, Basilides, Marcion, and Carpocrates include Mandaeanism (though debunked as an *Ur*-Gnosticism by Carsten Colpe as related in King, *Gnosticism*, 141–143), Manichaeism, and Catharism (Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 130–153).

[121] Pagels praises his *Thomas* commentary for the depth of its 'spiritual inquiry' (Amundsen, *Insights*, vii).

[122] Ibid., 9–10.

[123] Idem, *Illumination*, 39–60.

[124] Idem, *Insights*, 16.

[125] Ibid., 248.

[126] Hence 'the world is necessarily evil, because it is just not enough [...] There is more inside than there is outside' (idem, *Illumination*, 79; also idem, *Insights*, 171: 'The

How to live a fulfilling, happy life in such a world? Modern rationality[127] is declared a temporary diversion, as are materialism and physical pleasure;[128] unique among the authors treated here, Amundsen does not reject *Thomas*' ascetic traits but esteems them. Religious institutions try to insulate the individual from the harshness of the world with ritual and dogma, but ultimately fail to provide fulfillment.[129] Discussing *Thomas* logion 2 ('seeking and finding'), Amundsen sums up the basic questions that the individual must confront: 'What is the "I" that sees myself in the world? [...] What was this "I" that watched? And, in what way did it exist, if it had an existence at all? What was really going on?'[130] Having found the world to be the place it is, the individual truly has become disturbed, just as Jesus predicted.

Yet the process of seeking and finding, of spiritual inquiry, becomes a spiritual answer: 'That which sensed alienation was truly alien, and that was a revelation that began to lift my spiritual poverty. The kingdom of Light was literally inside of me!'.[131] This is what Jesus is trying to show in *Thomas* logion 77:[132] 'the kingdom of light is not a political or economic re-organization of the world [...] it is beyond and inside, and it is spread out over the world in the depth of human beings'.[133] Such a 'mystical experience', 'what Castaneda called "stopping the world"', 'is what Jesus called "the Sabbath"'.[134] 'It cannot be measured and it cannot be observed. It is not heard in any way [...] nor is it felt [...] It simply awakens the innermost core of us that was before all things; before the sleep of existence came upon us'.[135]

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world is a corpse. That's okay with me. I'm not part of that anyway. Neither are you'). Elsewhere he says he's not a world hater, but a spirit lover (ibid., 230).

[127] 'The packaging changes, but the items within remain the same. All the intellectual manipulation of words, as well as social and political systems become merely an animal pacing in a cage' (idem, *Illumination*, 46).

[128] Ascetic passages such as *Thomas* logion 29 ('poverty of the body') are taken to refer to 'the world of materiality, and the world of the social order of human beings' which cloak the reality of the true self' (ibid., 28–29). However, no specific practice is recommended other than introspection, and to try not to shop so much. See also discussion of logion 28 (idem, *Insights*, 91–93).

[129] Ibid., 42–44.

[130] Ibid., 11–13.

[131] Ibid., 17; see also on logion 113 ibid., 314–316.

[132] Ibid., 222; see also ibid., 59–63.

[133] Ibid., 14.

[134] Ibid., 85–86, on logion 27.

[135] Idem, *Illumination*, 33; similarly, 'the nature and fundamental characteristics of the "Pleroma" or "Fullness" cannot be explained or spoken of through language' (ibid., 59).

As far as Amundsen is concerned, such esoteric revelation, phrased in Jungian terms, is the true teaching of Jesus, unperverted by mainstream churches: 'Christianity was meant to be a spirituality about making the unconscious conscious, about freeing people from inner slavery and psychic oppression. For Jesus and the Gnostics, it was a spirituality about recovery of self [...]'.[136] Hence *Thomas*' value: it 'impart(s) a liberating message of spirituality' rather than aiding those 'invested in the creation of and sustaining an organized church body'.[137]

We are to take the gospel's author fully as the 'doubting Thomas' of John 20:24–29, and are encouraged with him to reject authoritarianism and blind faith (especially in Christian ethics) and to spread spiritual light through incisive inquiry.[138] Amundsen is the only author of those treated here to address explicitly the pericope of doubting Thomas. Amundsen appropriates John's polemic in order to further identify himself with a heretical 'other' to the Christian mainstream. Simultaneously, he demarcates his ideas from the New Age,[139] but his exegesis of *Thomas* posits a worldview that looks very much like that of the New Age, perhaps most clearly in its estimation of holistic self-actualization. His commentary on *Thomas* logion 108 reads: 'we become the truth, we never worship it [...] As long as I worship something outside of my true essence I never come to be the truth that I am'.[140] Much like Hoeller's work, Amundsen's New Age exegesis of *Thomas* claims not to

[136] Ibid., 14; see also ibid., 4–5, 25, 28, and 7: 'Somewhere Jesus' message got lost. He died as a result of awakening people [...] Later, his so called followers replaced Jesus' message of the struggle for freedom and awareness with a religious system of atonement for sin [...] The message of truth and freedom is denied by most churches [...] only carried by a precious few—the thinkers and mystics [...] Perhaps Christianity died the day it became the religion of the Empire under Constantine'.

[137] Idem, *Insights* 2; also ibid., 4.

[138] 'People today have become "doubters", and perhaps the "doubting" Thomas looks more like we look than the simple minded folks who just accepted blind authority. Perhaps what began as an attempt to discredit an author through scandalizing him, now makes him look more real and essentially thoughtful [...] It is the doubters among us that ask the questions and push deeper in the issue of truth than those who are just so willing to follow external authority, even into the abyss of ignorance and stupidity' (ibid., 7). We are exhorted to be doubters, and spread light instead (ibid., 75–77 on logion 24).

[139] 'Many search within the context of "New Age" quasi-religions that help people feel better about being here. But in the final analysis they fall prey to the same error as do the traditional orthodox religions that they seek to escape [...] Positive thinking theology is just code for denial—the "don't ask" syndrome' (idem, *Illumination*, 75).

[140] Idem, *Insights*, 304.

be religious,[141] but the true teaching of Jesus, long lost but now available to students of Gnosticism.

6. *New Age Polemics and Thomas Scholarship*

While Jungianism is clearly a major source for New Age exegetes of *Thomas*, there are also interesting appropriations of Nag Hammadi scholarship. First, our commentators agree on Helmut Koester's early hypothesis that *Thomas* shares the genre of wisdom sayings (*logoi sophōn*) with Q and hence a comparably early date of composition, perhaps even 60 or 70 CE.[142] Kushi and Winterhalter quote the same passage by Koester.[143] On the one hand, each of these commentaries was written and published in America, where Koester and Robinson's research on *Thomas* has been very well-received.[144] At the same time, as Bingham points out,[145] there are reasonable arguments for a later date even if one does not assert Grant's hypothesis that *Thomas* is a late

[141] 'Gnosticism is a perspective, not a religion' (idem, *Illumination*, 66).

[142] Koester has written widely on *Thomas*' temporal and social milieu, as in 'GNOMAI DIAPHOROI: The Origin and Nature of Diversification in the History of Early Christianity', esp. 126–143; idem, 'One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels', 186–187. It is important to note that in his later work Koester (*Gospels*, 85) simply states that 'the tradition of sayings of Jesus preserved in the Gospel of Thomas pre-dates the canonical Gospels', without offering a date. Robinson ('Bridging the Gulf') gives a detailed discussion of the origins of Koester's earlier argument and its reception. Of course Robinson's famous essay 'LOGOI SOPHON' is the indispensable form critical analysis for furnishing an early date for *Thomas*, although it does not itself assign *Thomas* a date.

[143] Kushi & Jack (*Peace*, 18): 'the emerging consensus is that the *Gospel of Thomas* is not Gnostic at all but is the earliest of all the Christian gospels and preserves Jesus's teachings in the simplest, most original form. "If one considers the form and wording of the individual sayings in comparison with the form in which they are preserved in the New Testament", observes Professor Helmut Koester of Harvard Divinity School, "The *Gospel of Thomas* almost always appears to have preserved a more original form of the traditional saying […]" […] Some historians now believe that it was composed as early as A.D. 50'. Winterhalter, *Jesus' Parables*, 3: 'the parables in the *Gospel of Thomas*, in the main, represent an authentic tradition of Jesus' sayings. *Thomas* […] is independent of the four gospels […]'. Idem, *Fifth Gospel*, 3: 'arguments made to show that the author of *Thomas* used the canonical gospels as a source are unconvincing. The *Gospel of Thomas* is thus of great significance as a source for the teachings of Jesus that is independent of the Four Gospels', followed by the quote from Koester (in Robinson, 'Bridging the Gulf', 144) also cited by Kushi & Jack, *Gospel of Peace*.

[144] See for example the discussion in Kloppenborg et al., *Reader*, 87–88; Meyer, 'Beginning'; Sieber, 'New Testament'; Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi*, 3–9.

[145] Bingham, '*Unearthing the Lost Words* (Review)', 390.

second-century Gnosticizing redaction of the synoptics.[146] Yet many scholars whose works inform the general public do not present these alternative views, and simply state that *Thomas* could be as early as our canonical gospels (Pagels) or even mid-first-century (Meyer)[147]—possibilities to be sure, but not the whole story.

Thus a kind of "scientistic"[148] appropriation of form criticism has taken place: hypotheses argued by Koester and Robinson are interpreted among New Agers as definitive proof of *Thomas*' status as a very early sayings gospel. Antiquity bequeaths authority, culminating in Powell's assertion that 'only the Secret Sayings of Jesus represent the true and original teachings of Christianity'.[149] Meanwhile, our Neognostic commentaries demonstrate some familiarity with Nag Hammadi scholarship[150] but are uninterested in dating *Thomas*.[151] Interestingly, there is no appropriation whatsoever of the considerable work done on the tradition and figure of Thomas.[152] Rather, the disciple Thomas is col-

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[146] Famously argued in Grant, *Secret Sayings*. Reasoned discussions of *Thomas* which reject the early dating based on Koester's analysis include Blomberg, 'Where do we Start…?' 22–25; Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 60–65; Kee, *Jesus in History*, 280; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 124–139; Johnson, 'Historical Jesus', 55–56, esp. 56 note 29. Criticisms of these views include Davies, *Wisdom*, 18–33 and De Conick, *Seek*, 3–27. A thorough summary of all the issues involved (both pro and con) can be found in Fallon & Cameron, 'Forschungsbericht', 4205–4224.

[147] In *Beyond Belief* (54), Pagels simply states that Thomas 'may have been written around the same time' as John; Meyer, *Bible*, 43, suggests 'as early as the middle of the first century, or somewhat later'; also idem, *Thomas*, 10; idem, *Gnostic Discoveries*, 63–64.

[148] Hammer, *Knowledge*, 206: 'scientism is the active positioning of one's own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic scientific discipline […] without, however, the use of methods generally approved within the scientific community, and without subsequent social acceptance of these manifestations by the mainstream of the scientific community […]'.

[149] Powell, *Zen*, xiv.

[150] Hoeller occasionally refers to the work of noted scholars (such as I. Coulianou and M. A. Williams); see *Gnosticism*, 181. Amundsen, meanwhile, lauds Pagels' *Gospels* (*Illumination*, 10–11) and admonishes Funk et al., *Five Gospels* (*Insights*, 152).

[151] I do not know to whom Hoeller refers when he states that the resemblance of *Thomas*' logoi with those of the synoptics 'has caused some scholars to surmise that *The Gospel of Thomas* might be in fact the fabled Q Document' (Hoeller, *Jung*, 186). In his commentary, Amundsen immediately states that *Thomas*' date and context is not an issue for him; 'truth is truth regardless of its context and origin. Whether it comes from the earliest Christians, as I suspect it does, [or not] […] begs the real question' (Amundsen, *Insights*, 2).

[152] Useful and critical introductions to the hypothesized 'School of Thomas' can be found in Koester, 'GNOMAI DIAPHORAI', 126–143; Layton, *Scriptures*, 359–365; Poirier, 'Thomas Tradition'; Sellew, 'Thomas Christianity'; and Uro, *Thomas*, 20–30, perhaps the most skeptical of the readings.

lapsed into the larger context of an ancient gospel which provides Jesus' 'secret' teachings. Apparently, the esoteric nature of Thomas' sayings is tantalizing enough for New Age readers that little interest in Thomas himself is provoked.[153]

The New Age appropriation of Koester's dating urges further investigation into how Nag Hammadi scholarship is being interpreted within New Age and Neognostic circles. This topic deserves extensive study of its own, but I will attempt in the following to provide a cursory discussion of how some popular *Thomas* scholarship is appropriated by the New Age polemicists discussed in the above. While scholarship is awash in books on *Thomas* and Gnosticism, New Age and Neognostic bibliographies and websites are dominated by two prolific scholars of *Thomas*, Elaine Pagels and Marvin Meyer.

Pagels achieved international stardom with her 1978 National Book Award-winning *Gnostic Gospels*; more recently she has written a book focusing on *Thomas* and its relationship to the *Gospel of John—Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. Given the ubiquity of Pagels' books in the sources of New Age and Neognostic commentaries on *Thomas*,[154] it is worth assessing which elements in Pagels' scholarship are attractive to these readers and how they are appropriated.

Perhaps most obviously relevant to our New Age commentators is the way Pagels frames the relationship between the heretical Christianities and what eventually became orthodox. She identifies Gnostics as 'heretics', people who 'seek' 'not a different "system of doctrines" so much as insights or intimations of the divine that validate themselves in experience—what we might call hints and glimpse offered by the luminous *epinoia*'.[155] The narrative of her adolescent participation in an intolerant, evangelical Protestant church[156] frames the problem of how to receive *Thomas* today very precisely:

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[153] Kushi & Jack do briefly discuss the various traditions that have sprung up around *Thomas* but do not develop them in their larger commentary (*Gospel of Peace*, 18–19).

[154] Hoeller lists Pagels' monographs (with the exception of *The Gnostic Paul*) on the Ecclesia Gnostica website as recommended reading; Amundsen discusses Pagels' *Gospels* favorably (*Illumination*, 10–11); Kushi & Jack list Meyer's *Secret Teachings of Jesus* in their bibliography (*Gospel of Peace*, 183); Powell refers us to no sources.

[155] Pagels, *Belief*, 183; for her discussion of *epinoia* as creative, imaginative religious inspiration or intuition, see ibid., 166–167, 177. Pagels often compares Gnostic circles to those of artists, many of which are fascinated by Christianity, 'yet [find] themselves in revolt against orthodox institutions' (idem, *Gospels*, 154; ibid., 54).

[156] Idem, *Belief*, 31: 'before long, however, I learned what inclusion cost: the leaders of the church I attended directed their charges not to associate with outsiders, except

> We have also seen the hazards—even terrible harm—that sometimes result from unquestioning acceptance of religious authority [...] Most of us, sooner or later, find that, at critical points in our lives, we must strike out on our own to make a path where none exists. What I have come to love in the wealth and diversity of our religious traditions—and the communities that sustain them—is that they offer the testimony of innumerable people to spiritual discovery.[157]

Several elements of this passage must seem, to the New Age seeker, to be directed precisely at them: the characterization of mainstream faith as potentially dangerous obedience, the necessity of creating one's own individual spiritual development, the high esteem for religious diversity and the spiritual wealth that diversity is said to offer the seeker. '*Thomas*', she writes, 'expresses what would become a central theme of Jewish—and later Christian—mysticism a thousand years later: that the "image of God" is hidden within everyone [...]'.[158]

More than any other Nag Hammadi text, *Thomas* offers to Pagels a spirituality which appreciates religious diversity and values self-actualization. Its Jesus is not a demanding individual obsessed with sin who dies an awful death, but a living teacher, almost an eastern sage.[159] *Thomas* logion 24 ('a person of light enlightens the whole world'), 'far from legitimizing any institution, directs one instead to oneself—to one's inner capacity to find one's own direction, to the "light within" '.[160] This light is 'the kingdom' of light, interpreted as self-discovery rather than eschatology,[161] as in New Age commentary. In her early work Pagels alludes to the Jungian language which became so popular in New Age readings.[162]

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to convert them'. See also idem, *Gospels*, 125: 'Gnostics tended to regard all doctrines, speculations, and myths—their own as well as others'—only as approaches to truth. The orthodox, by contrast, were coming to identify their own doctrine as itself the truth—the sole legitimate form of Christian faith'.

[157] Idem, *Belief*, 185; see also ibid., 182: 'since Christians often adopt Irenaeus's view of controversy, many tend to assume that one side can speak the truth, while others speak only lies—or evil'.

[158] Ibid., 41; see also ibid., 46.

[159] Idem, *Gospels*, 19, 138, 146.

[160] Ibid., 130. On logion 70 ('our salvation is within us'): 'Such Gnostics acknowledged that pursuing gnosis engages each person in a solitary, difficult process' (ibid., 130). On the incipit: 'Thomas's 'living Jesus' challenges his hearers to find the way for themselves' (idem, *Belief*, 53).

[161] Idem, *Gospels*, 136–137; idem, *Belief*, 47–51, 54–57, treats logia 2, 3, 6, and 70.

[162] 'For Gnostics, exploring the psyche became explicitly what it is for many people today implicitly—a religious quest. Some who seek their own interior direction, like the radical Gnostics, reject religious institutions as a hindrance to their progress. Others, like

In *Beyond Belief*, the *Gospel of John* is cast as *Thomas*' mystical yet orthodox twin: Pagels argues that both *Thomas* and *John* comment on Genesis 1 with their extensive use of the metaphor of light to describe divinity,[163] but that they differ as to how this light might be accessed. For *Thomas*, it is within the seeker, while for *John*, it can be found through submission to faith.[164] Drawing from Gregory Riley's analysis of *John* and *Thomas*, Pagels argues that the 'pericope of doubting Thomas' in John 20:21–24 may have been the first attack from proto-orthodoxy on one of Christianity's earliest mystical strains.[165]

To be sure, Pagels' commentary cannot be mistaken for those we have observed above. Such heavy engagement with the New Testament and the Fathers is absent in the New Age *Thomas* readings. Pagels considers

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the Valentinians, willingly participate in them, although they regard the church more as an instrument of their own self-discovery than as the necessary "ark of salvation"' (idem, *Gospels*, 132–133; see also ibid., 138).

[163] This thesis is an expansion of Pagels' article, 'Exegesis'. Important passages discussing the "kingdom" of light include *Thomas* logia 3, 49, and 113; see also 22, 27, 46, 82, 96–99, 107, 109, and 114. For analysis see Brown, 'Thomas', 170; Davies, 'Protology', 665–667, 670–672; Koester, *Gospels*, 117–118; Pagels, *Belief*, 50–51; Popkes, 'Ich bin', 660; and esp. the monograph of Nordsieck, *Reich Gottes*. For discussions of the exclusivity of Jesus' revelation and role as mediator in *John* (perhaps most classically, 14:6–7: 'Jesus said unto him [Thomas], "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one come to the father, except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; from henceforth you know him, and have seen him"'. Other relevant passages include 1:7, 1:9, 1:12, 3:18, 6:53–58, 6:69, 8:19, 8:24, 8:58, 13:20, 14:7, and 16:28); see Brown, *John*, 9, 147–149, 299–300, 350, 367, esp. 630–631; idem, 'Thomas', 170; Bultmann, *John*, 606–607; Dodd, *Interpretation*, 163–169, 357–358, esp. 168; Funk et al., *Five Gospels*, 420–421, 451; Meeks, 'Man from Heaven', esp. 70; Pagels, *Belief*, 64–69; Pollard, *Johannine Christology*, 20–22; Popkes, 'Ich bin', 664–665; Woll, *Johannine Christianity*, 47–68, esp. 47–52. However, Dodd (*Interpretation*, 149) takes the 'eternal life' of John 3:36, 5:24, 5:47, and 6:54 to be present in the here and now, a rather Thomasian outlook.

[164] Pagels, *Belief*, 41, 66–69.

[165] Riley's argument (*Resurrection*, esp. 155–156) is that *John* crafted his excoriation of *Thomas* and his theology of resurrection to combat *Thomas*' (alleged) denial of the resurrection of the body. As Davies ('Resurrection, Book Review', 148) argues, Riley's argument hinges on a very particular reading of the word *hei* ('house') as "body" in *Thomas* logion 71 ('destruction of "this building"') which is difficult to sustain and certainly cannot preclude other interpretations (such as those of Cameron, 'Ancient Myths', 241–243; Nordsieck, *Thomas-Evangelium*, 271–276; Meyer, *Thomas*, 71; Valantasis, *Thomas*, 150). Pagels is far from alone in postulating a possible conflict between *Thomas* and *John* (and/or their communities). De Conick (*Seek; Voices*) takes *John* to be attacking *Thomas*' visionary mysticism with faith mysticism; Attridge ('"Seeking and Finding"') investigates the relationships between *Thomas* and *John*'s discussions of seeking, finding, knocking, and asking; Dunderberg ('John and Thomas'; 'I-Sayings') has contributed two important summaries of many of the issues at hand in comparing the gospels, favoring parsimony.

Thomas an ascetic work,[166] although she notes that *Thomas*' Jesus is a 'living Jesus', with the morbid tale of crucifixion absent.[167] Nonetheless, the highlights of Pagels' interpretation of *Thomas*—a focus on individual mystical/psychological achievement framed within the larger issues of religious plurality and (in)tolerance—are easily appropriated by New Age discourse. It seems reasonable to suppose, then, that Pagels' exegesis of *Thomas* has influenced the New Age commentaries detailed above, which have come to similar, if significantly more aggressively formulated, conclusions about *Thomas*' modern relevance.

Although not cited as often as Pagels, the work of Marvin Meyer has become increasingly relevant to New Age understandings of primitive Christianity. Author of numerous books and articles on *Thomas* (in addition to other 'secret', 'hidden', 'other', etc. gospels/sayings of Jesus), Meyer is also a prominent fellow of the Jesus Seminar, whose *Five Gospels* (the fifth, of course, being *Thomas*) was both hugely successful and controversial. I will not discuss the Jesus Seminar here, mainly because its interest in *Thomas* dovetails only loosely, if at all, with that of the New Age. The Jesus Seminar "blacklists" as inauthentic almost all of the sayings in *Thomas* not already attested in the New Testament,[168] and focuses instead on its portrait of an uncrucified, 'living Jesus' (much like Pagels'). *Thomas*' itinerant Jesus, with his "countercultural wisdom", serves as evidence to support varieties of the hypothesis that Jesus was a student of Cynic philosophy,[169] around which circulates much of the (at times polemical) criticism of the Jesus Seminar.[170]

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[166] Pagels, *Gospels*, 54 (referring to logia 29, 111).

[167] As for example in *Gospels*, 19.

[168] See for example, their discussions of sayings 2, 3, 11, 18, 38, and 50 in Funk et al., *Five Gospels*; Miller (*Jesus Seminar*, 17) in his defense of the J. S.' treatment of Thomas: 'Thomas tells us very little about Jesus that we didn't already know from the New Testament. The important contribution that Thomas makes is that it provides numerous parallel versions of sayings found in the other gospels'. See also ibid., 70.

[169] Meyer (*Thomas*, 16) and Patterson (*God of Jesus*, 90–118) commonly refer to Jesus as a teacher of 'counterculture'. For introductions to the 'Cynic Jesus' hypothesis (supported by Meyer on grounds of *Thomas* [Meyer, *Thomas*, 16–17; idem, 'Schweitzer', 26–28]), see Downing, 'Deeper Reflections', 97, note 2, and Kloppenborg, 'A Dog among the Pigeons', esp. 84, note 29; for a portrait of the 'historical Jesus' as a 'peasant Jewish cynic', see Crossan, *Historical Jesus*; for a general critique see Johnson, 'What's at Stake', 66–69.

[170] Most venomous is Pearson, 'Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar', 319–320, and esp. 338: '"Seek—you'll find". This is one of the "authentic" sayings of Jesus (Matthew 7:7 // Luke 11:9 // Thomas 92:1 [colored pink]) in *The Five Gospels*. A group of secularized theologians and secular academics went seeking a secular Jesus, and they found him! They think they found him, but, in fact, they created him. Jesus

In 2003, however, Meyer (and Barnstone) published the *Gnostic Bible* with Shambhala Press, publisher of many New Age and especially Asian religious texts. Gnosis here is truly presented as *world religion*, via dozens of excerpts from the Nag Hammadi corpus, the heresiologists, and Mandaean, Manichaean, Islamic, and Cathar literature. These 'Gnostic texts of mystical wisdom', as the subtitle reads, provide a book worthy of its title, a bible for Gnostics living today, i.e. Neognostics and New Agers.[171] Indeed, Meyer is conscious of his audience, as indicated by his remarks on Pagels' *Gospels*: 'to many readers of Pagels's book the Gnostics seemed to advocate a more attractive sort of spirituality than that of the orthodox priests, bishops, and heresiologists, and they seemed to be on the right side of many issues that remain important issues to the present day'.[172]

Meyer's ancient and medieval Gnostics must appear extremely attractive to those in New Age and Neognostic circles. They were tolerant, and 'accepted insight wherever it could be found [...] [They] studied religious works from the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Zoroastrians, Muslims, and Buddhists. All such sacred texts disclosed truths, and all were to be celebrated for their wisdom'.[173] They were independent seekers, 'religious mystics who proclaimed gnosis, knowledge, as the way of salvation. To know oneself truly allowed Gnostic men and women to know god directly, without any need for the mediation of rabbis, priests, bishops, imams, or other religious officials'.[174] This bible of the Gnostics has 'no sense of a single, authoritative collection [...] [It] constitutes no closed canon', as 'all these Gnostic texts may be equally authoritative [...] such a sense of wisdom and knowledge has made

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the "party animal", whose zany wit and caustic humor would enliven an otherwise dull cocktail party—this is the product of the Jesus Seminar's six years' research. In a sense the Jesus Seminar, with its ideology of secularization, represents a "shadow image" of the old "New Quest", with its neo-orthodox theology—and its ultimate bankruptcy'. Less vitriolic attacks on the J. S.' use of *Thomas* include Blomberg, 'Where Do We Start...?', 25; Bock, 'Live or Jive', 89–90; White, 'Jesus Seminar'; and Yamauchi, 'Jesus Outside the New Testament', 217–222. See also the more sympathetic comments of Nordsieck, *Thomas-Evangelium*, 24–25, 30. A calm defense of the Seminar by one of its members can be found in Miller, *Jesus Seminar*. A useful, general introduction to the Seminar is Dart, *Heresy and History*, 153–161.

[171] This perhaps is what Doubleday tried to achieve by slapping the caption 'ancient wisdom for the New Age' along with a pyramid and the tree of knowledge on the cover of the first paperback edition of Layton's *Scriptures*.

[172] Meyer, 'Gnostics', 12; see also idem, *Gnostic Discoveries*, 7–8.

[173] Idem, 'Introduction', 2.

[174] Ibid., 1.

this sacred literature attractive to free spirits in the past and equally fascinating to many in the present day'.[175]

Thomas is the first text of the *Gnostic Bible*, placed prominently as our first chapter following Meyer's explication of Gnosticism. In his *Thomas* commentary (1992), Meyer depicts the gospel in much the same way as Pagels: absent crucifixion, miracles, resurrection, apocalypse, and dogma, the gospel 'invite[s] [its readers] to join the quest for meaning in life by interpreting the oftentimes cryptic and enigmatic "hidden sayings" of Jesus'.[176] He goes beyond Pagels in asserting that 'wisdom as preached in the Gospel of Thomas, with its persistent call to the quest for insight, may approach the wisdom of the Cynics'.[177] This assessment of *Thomas* is academically defensible, but can at the same time easily be appropriated by New Age readers with polemics in mind. The ambivalence of Meyer's commentary is clear in its appendix, a polemical 'Gnostic Sermon' authored by eminent literary critic Harold Bloom.[178]

My suggestion that Pagels' and Meyer's scholarship appeals to New Age and Neognostic lay readers is not meant to insinuate that either scholar (or their work) is 'Gnostic' or 'New Age'. Rather, I wish to point out that when New Agers and Neognostics, commenting on *Thomas*, look to popular scholarship for guidance, they find studies which speak to their polemical interests by framing *Thomas* in a discourse which sets diversity and pluralism over and against the violence and intolerance of orthodoxy. When attendant scholarship does not harmonize with the New Age reading, as in the case of ascetic passages in *Thomas* (recognized as such by both Pagels and Meyer),[179] it appears that New Age readers simply ignore it.

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[175] Ibid., 19.

[176] Idem, *Thomas*, 10–11.

[177] Ibid., 17.

[178] The following passage is typical: 'Unlike the canonical gospels, that of Judas Thomas the Twin spares us the crucifixion, makes the resurrection unnecessary, and does not present us with a God named Jesus [...] You encounter a Jesus who is unsponsored and free. No one could be burned or even scorned in the name of this Jesus, and no one has been hurt in any way, except perhaps for those bigots, high church or low, who may have glanced at so permanently surprising a work' (Bloom, 'A Reading', 111).

[179] For Pagels, see above, note 166; for Meyer, 'Passers-by', 65; idem, 'Making Mary Male', 76–77.

7. *Conclusion*

The various New Age and Neognostic readings of *Thomas* discussed above are diverse, but share several common traits. The ubiquity of Jungian psychology and New Age concerns about holism and alternative wisdom testify to the New Age character of the self-proclaimed 'Neognostics' discussed here, despite their assertions to the contrary. Purportedly Neognostic readings of *Thomas*, however, seem more comfortable with the text's ascetic passages and less interested in authorizing its veracity by asserting its antiquity. However, all the commentaries consider *Thomas* in roughly the same way as Meyer and Pagels: as a very early Christian text comprised of mystical teachings, a 'peripheral wisdom' free from ethical or dogmatic instruction. Also ubiquitous is the understanding of *Thomas* exemplified in Bloom, as a book which could not possibly inspire division or polemics among its adherents. We are reminded, then, how polemicists declare themselves non-polemical. The paradoxical ambivalence of peripheral wisdom lies not only in the centering of self in the periphery but the polemicist's exemption of self from polemic.

New Age *Thomas* commentaries also invite larger questions about the reception of the Nag Hammadi codices. The commentators discussed here have sought out scholarship that seems to them to affirm the text's antiquity and its contemporary urgency, and have not employed scholarship which may challenge their use of *Thomas* in polemicizing against mainstream Christianity and secular culture. In the cases of Amundsen and Hoeller, we see similar appropriations and rejections of scholarship into Gnosticism. At the same time, if the New Age appropriation of *Thomas* scholarship is any indication, polemics certainly plays a role in ensuring that "Gnosticism" as a "brand name" retains its "secure market".[180] As long as *Thomas* and Gnosticism remain touchstones for individuals seeking alternative sources of wisdom and inspiration, interpreters, exegetes, and scholars will be able to sell books about them. While Layton is correct to strictly demarcate the historical phenomena of ancient *gnostikoi* from the modern discourse about "Gnosticism",[181] it is undeniable that the reception of the ancient

[180] As M. Smith notes ('Gnostikos', 806–807), '"Gnosticism" is salable, therefore it will continue to be produced'.

[181] Layton, 'Prolegomena', 395.

texts has become entwined with modern religious polemics. New Age *Thomas* commentary is merely one of the rapidly emerging polemical discourses about the significance of the Nag Hammadi discoveries for modern culture.

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UNITED IN DIVERSITY, DIVIDED FROM WITHIN: THE DYNAMICS OF LEGITIMATION IN CONTEMPORARY WITCHCRAFT

Titus Hjelm

Contemporary Witchcraft[1] is an amorphous set of beliefs and practices ranging from simple kitchen magic—e.g. the concoction of love potions—to elaborate ceremonial worship. If there is one thing that unites the diverse field, it is a commonly shared reverence for nature in all of its forms. This attitude can manifest in diverse ways, from a personal relationship with nature to a communal phenomenon sustained by ritual. Contemporary Witchcraft is therefore a loosely defined term, and the Witchcraft community is in principle open to anybody who identifies herself as a "Witch" or "Wiccan".[2]

Witchcraft—or any other religion for that matter—never exists in a social vacuum. The practice and doctrines of a religion are shaped by the social and cultural context.[3] This chapter explores how contemporary Witchcraft is legitimated vis-à-vis the wider society and culture, where conventional conceptions of Witchcraft are often either negatively laden or presented as entertaining "superstition" by the popular media. This effort at achieving legitimacy can be seen as a dynamic process, where discourses on contemporary Witchcraft are constructed in relation to the boundaries of whatever is considered "good religion"

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[1] It has become a standard in contemporary Pagan studies to write "Witch" and "Witchcraft" in upper case when referring to a modern chosen religious identity, as distinct from historical "witches" and "witchcraft" (in lower case). See e.g. Pearson, 'Wicca and Paganism', 16; Pike, *Earthly Bodies*, 241 note 7. Upper case "Paganism" and "Pagan" refers to the same distinction.

[2] Harvey, *Paganism*, 35. For example, In the Q&A section of the annual "Witches' Sabbath" in Finland (an informal gathering of Wiccans of all persuasions), the answer to the question 'who is welcome to the Sabbath?' was: 'Wiccans are welcome. We use self-identification as the definition of Wicca: you are welcome if you consider yourself a Wiccan' (www.wicca.fi/wiccasapatti/ukk.html, accessed 2 September 2006). However, cf. Pearson, 'Wicca and Paganism', 43. On the relation between contemporary Witchcraft and western esotericism, see von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 119–120.

[3] The prime example of this is of course the adoption of early Christianity as a state religion.

in a particular social and cultural context. The legitimation of Wicca in Finland serves as my case study.[4]

The main argument of this chapter is that, first of all, contrary to some views of contemporary Witchcraft as a movement devoid of tradition,[5] there is a distinct tradition of uniting against any attempt by the social institutions and movements in the surrounding society to undermine the legitimacy of Witchcraft.[6] Secondly, and more importantly, legitimation vis-à-vis the wider society necessarily involves some kind of boundary maintenance *within* the movement, thus making outward legitimation an important component of the identity construction of contemporary Witchcraft.

1. *The Social Location of Religions: A Contextual Process Model*

The field of sociology of religion has largely concerned itself with the question of the social role of religion in general. The question of secularization has occupied most sociologists of religion and has relegated questions about the legitimacy of individual religions within a particular social and cultural context to the margins of the discipline.[7] In fact, scholars of new religious movements (NRMs) have been the ones mainly concerned with the social mechanisms through which certain religions achieve a legitimate status—or, more often in the case of NRMs, why such legitimacy is withheld from certain religions and religious movements. Although this is the focus of most studies of NRMs, the legitimation of religions ("old" or "new") has been rarely studied explicitly.[8]

My theoretical model is based on the social constructionist tradition, combining aspects of Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* and American sociology of social problems[9] with classic formula-

[4] Hjelm, 'Legitimating Wicca'.
[5] Christ, 'Goddess'.
[6] Hjelm, 'Tradition'.
[7] See e.g. Dillon, *Handbook*; Fenn, *Campanion.* Thomas Luckmann, who explicitly speaks of the "social location of religion", also uses the concept in a general sense, speaking of the privatization of religion as opposed to the location of particular religions. Luckmann, *Invisible*; Luckmann, 'Shrinking Transcendence'. See also Knott, *Location.*
[8] Lewis, *Legitimating*, 11.
[9] Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*; Spector & Kitsuse, *Constructing*; Blumer, 'Social Problems'; Becker, *Outsiders*.

tions by Durkheim and Weber.[10] The combination of these approaches is what I call a "contextual process model" for the location of religions in society. This model is summarized in Figure 1. In the following I will present a breakdown of the model and its "stages".

a) Society and Culture ↔	b) Boundary Maintenance ↔	c) The Claims-making Arena ↔	d) Legitimation ↔	e) Alternative Religion

Figure 1: The social location of religions: A contextual process model.

On the left side, *society and culture* (a) is a shorthand label for the status that religion in general has in a particular social setting. This includes the constitutional status of religion and the related formal regulations, but also the informal status, i.e. what the cognitive majority[11] understands as "normal/good religion". What happens to constitute the content of the mainstream beliefs is historically and socially determined and not implied in the model itself. In the Nordic countries the social and cultural context of religion would be determined mainly in relation to Lutheranism, which has a long cultural hegemony and close historical ties to political decision-making. In France the context would be that of *laïcité*, the constitutional separation of church and stage on the one hand, and the cultural influence of the Catholic Church on the other.[12]

"Society" and "culture" are evidently dynamic concepts. A society's shared conventional understanding of religion and the location of religion is in constant flux. However, there are certain deeply imbedded social and cultural conventions which limit the types of religious expression deemed acceptable. These may be explicit, such as constitutional and legislative limitations, or implicit, such as cultural values. Constitutional regulations are a quite straightforward example of *boundary maintenance* (b in Figure 1)[13] by an established institution of society. However, even in cases where the opposition to a religion or religious practice is based on more implicit cultural values, boundary maintenance is carried out in practice by institutions or social movements which are able to mobilize shared sentiments into action.[14]

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[10] Durkheim, *Division*; Weber, *Economy*; see also Erikson, *Puritans*.
[11] Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 119–128; Berger, *Rumor*, 6.
[12] Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe*.
[13] Erikson, *Puritans*.
[14] Mauss, *Social Problems*, 59.

I want to stress that I am not implying that state institutions or cultural majorities are by definition conservative ("maintaining"). On the contrary, there is ample evidence that both political elites on the one hand and grassroots movements on the other have in different contexts been central in shifting the boundaries of religion. Scholarship on social movements has stressed the "precarious balance" between repression and co-optation of social movements by the established institutions of society.[15] This also applies to the emergence of alternative religions—most of which live in harmonious coexistence with the established religions of western societies. Nevertheless, there are always social and cultural boundaries which alternative religions in a particular context have to challenge to become legitimate.[16] What is considered "alternative" is in fact defined by those very same boundaries.

This takes us to the other end of the figure. As implied above, being "alternative" is not an inherent attribute of any religion, but a label attributed as a result of being situated in a particular social and cultural context. Thus, the label *alternative* (e) is in this sense not affixed to a religion because it holds particular beliefs or enjoins specific practices.[17] Instead of being a category demarcated by a *substantive* definition, "alternative religion" is understood here in *contextual* terms.[18] Alternative religion is alternative because of its position vis-à-vis the social and cultural mainstream, *not* because it belongs to a tradition or "family" of religions conventionally defined as alternative. Therefore, when used in this sense, the term "alternative religion" is not synonymous with "new religious movements," as one might suppose from some of the literature in the field.[19]

Legitimation (d), although a central concept for the study of new and emergent religions, has rarely been studied explicitly. Although not without its problems, James R. Lewis' *Legitimating New Religions* presents a usable framework for analyzing the legitimation strategies of alternative

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[15] Smelser, *Collective Behavior*, 282–286; Mauss, *Social Problems*, 61.

[16] Beyer, 'Social Forms'; Kniss, 'Mapping'.

[17] Cf. Miller, *Alternative Religions*.

[18] Although an established convention in sociology of religion, I am consciously refraining from using "functional" as the counterpart to "substantive" definitions of religion (see e.g. McGuire, *Social Context*, 10) because I am describing religions that are substantively recognizable, unlike functionally understood "religion" in a general sense. For a classic functional definition of religion see Luckmann, *Invisible*. For a critique of functional definitions see Berger, 'Substantive versus Functional'.

[19] Miller, *Alternative Religions*; Melton, 'Alternative Religions'.

religions.[20] Lewis employs Weber's[21] tripartite schema of rationality—tradition—charisma in his study. But whereas Weber's concepts have been previously used mostly in the analysis of *inward* legitimation, i.e. making beliefs and practices appear legitimate from the perspective of converts and followers, Lewis rightly emphasizes the equally important need of alternative religions to legitimate their views in the eyes of the wider society.[22] This is what I call *outward* legitimation.[23]

Outward legitimation can be defined as the attempts by an alternative religion to engage in public discourse, in the hope of thereby achieving legitimate status. Although Lewis uses the term "legitimation strategies", this is not meant to imply that legitimation is always a conscious attempt, comparable to e.g. a marketing strategy.[24] Legitimation can take multiple forms, ranging from informal dinner table discussions among friends to highly coordinated publicity campaigns. The main point in all legitimation is to represent the religion in question as an attractive alternative, and a "good religion", whatever the standards for such a definition are in the particular context.

It should be noted, however, that legitimation does not rest solely on the shoulders of the alternative religion itself. Sometimes alternative religions actively solicit testimonies from representatives of society's established institutions in order to boost their claims to legitimacy. With its active recruitment of academics and representatives of other religions to comment on the religious character of the movement, Scientology is a case in point of this kind of "extra-movement" legitimation.[25]

The attempts by the larger society to maintain boundaries on the one hand, and the legitimating claims of alternative religions on the other, meet in the *claimsmaking arena* (c). The claimsmaking arena is always public, but its scope varies. Face-to-face interaction in a local community is one example of a claimsmaking arena on the smallest of scales. On a larger scale, the most important claimsmaking arenas are the mass media, politics, and the court system.[26] Of these, the arena of courts is perhaps the best researched.[27] In the American context,

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[20] Lewis, *Legitimating*. For a critique of Lewis' book, see Reader, 'Legitimating'.
[21] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 215–216.
[22] Lewis, *Legitimating*, 13–14.
[23] Hjelm, 'Tradition', 113; Hjelm, 'Legitimating Wicca'.
[24] Lewis, *Legitimating*, 13.
[25] See Church of Scientology International, *Scientology*, Appendices 2–8.
[26] Loseke, *Social Problems*, 40.
[27] E.g. Richardson, *Regulating Religion*.

research on constitutional battles over religion in the United States Supreme Court is a well-established field of study.[28] Considering the overwhelmingly mediated character of modern life, there have been relatively few studies of the importance of the media in the public construction of religions.[29]

There is unfortunately no space here to go into detail regarding the complex mechanisms of the claimsmaking arena.[30] What is important in this context is that the claimsmaking arena is where the legitimacy of a religion within a particular socio-cultural context is defined. As a result of the definitional struggle taking place in the claimsmaking arena, religions achieve different "levels" of legitimacy. Although he does not explicitly discuss the issue of legitimation, J. Gordon Melton's[31] classification of NRMs in relation to other types of religion can be interpreted as a model of different levels of legitimacy. Melton uses the following categories to construct a contextualized classification of NRMs:

1. Churches (i.e. dominant religious traditions in a given culture)
2. Ethnic Religions (e.g. Judaism, communities of Asian Buddhists, and Middle Eastern Muslims in western countries)
3. Sects (i.e. splinter groups of dominant traditions)
4. New Religious Movements (by which essentially everything else is meant)

Although Melton's discussion is in some ways problematic as a description of what has become known as "new religious movements",[32] it clarifies the question of legitimacy and of the social location of religions. Although both Melton's "ethnic religions" and "sects" might be called alternative, these two types of religion have 'some recognized legitimacy in the eyes of the religious establishment, [whereas] the *new religions* have yet to prove themselves'.[33] In many instances Melton's assertion appears accurate. Nevertheless, the controversies surrounding

[28] E.g. Hammond, *Liberty*; Hammond et al., *Religion on Trial*; McGraw, *Rediscovering*.

[29] E.g. Hoover, *Religion in the News*; Silk, *Unsecular Media*; Hjelm, 'Unholy'. There is a sizeable literature on news coverage of Islam, but only a few of these develop explicit theoretical models on how negative images of religion are constructed in the media. For an influential study of negative media labeling see Said, *Covering*.

[30] For further elaborations see Hilgartner & Bosk, 'Public Arenas'; Loseke, *Social Problems*, 25–44.

[31] Melton, 'Perspective', 80.

[32] Barker, 'Nova'.

[33] Melton, 'Perspective', 80 (emphasis in the original).

at least some ethnic religions, e.g. Islam in the West, are highly visible in the public arena. This serves as a good reminder that *what is at stake is not only the legitimacy of a set of religious beliefs and doctrines, but also the practices of a particular religion*. Although Islam is generally recognized as a "world religion" and treated as an ethnic religion in contexts where its adherents mainly come from an immigrant background, practices such as *halal* slaughter or Muslim dress codes for women periodically fuel public discussions in which the boundaries of both the wider society and of Islam are contested.

To state the issue briefly: if a religion does not achieve legitimacy in the eyes of the cognitive majority, it remains "alternative", whatever its substantive content may be. Therefore, NRMs are not inevitably relegated to an alternative status—although in practice this is often the case. Similarly, in societies fraught with ethnic tension, a NRM might have more legitimacy than a world religion that has become identified with a certain ethnic group. Once again, it is the context that determines what "alternative religion" refers to, not the other way around.

The contextual process model presented above is based on a configuration in which "mainstream" society on the one hand and the "alternative" religion on the other conflict in the claimsmaking arena. However, this does not imply conflict *per se*. At the core of the model is the question of *institutionalization* of religions. What the model explicates is that the social location of a religion or religious activity is institutionalized whenever there is a reciprocal typification of religions and adherents by those participating in public discourse.[34] The adherents of religions typified in negative terms will typically protest and create a counter-discourse. This means that the cycle of legitimation begins anew and the success of the counter-discourse depends on changes in both the socio-cultural framework and the religion itself. Only in rare cases will both sides remain completely unaffected by the definitional struggle occurring in the claimsmaking arena.[35]

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[34] In other words, this applies both to religions (as systems of belief) and actions defined as religious: '[Institutionalization] posits that actions of type X will be performed by actors of type X' (Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 54). E.g. 'Muslim women always wear a headscarf', 'Satanists sacrifice animals in their rituals', etc.

[35] Cf. Mauss, *Social Problems*, 59. In some cases, especially of those NRMs defined as "world-rejecting", it could be claimed that there is no need to legitimate the religion, because it exists and *wants* to exist "outside" of society. However, the need to legitimate does not arise primarily from within the group in question, but from outside *perceptions* of the group and challenges made based on those perceptions. Therefore it is not up to

This last point is emphasized in the above figure (figure 1) by the two-headed arrows. Although in my description of the model I have advanced from the sides toward the center of the figure (the claims-making arena), the process is never one-way, but always "acts back" on both society and the alternative religion in question.[36] Sometimes the changes brought about by the legitimation and the boundary maintenance process are deliberate, but sometimes they are unforeseen by either side. The legitimation of contemporary Witchcraft in Finland is an excellent example of the dynamics of this process. Before engaging with this specific case, it will be helpful to briefly situate contemporary Witchcraft in a historical context.

2. *The Roots of Victimization: The Idea of the "Burning Times" in Contemporary Witchcraft*

Contemporary Witchcraft originated in England in the years after the Second World War. Studies of the history of modern Paganism generally credit Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) with having formulated the basic characteristics of Witchcraft.[37] The subsequent development of contemporary Witchcraft led to an increasing atomization of the movement. Especially after the 1980s, there has been an increased eclecticism in Witchcraft, with a growing number of groups and individuals calling themselves Witches and Wiccans, but ignoring most of the pioneers' teachings or combining them with other contemporary Pagan beliefs and practices. Consequently, it is nowadays possible to find Wiccans who carry out practices never envisaged by Gardner, such as shamanic drumming, praying to Norse deities, and practicing divination with the tarot deck. There are even some Christian witches who call themselves "Christo-Wiccans".

Witchcraft thus presents itself as a diverse field with few uniting traits. One of the few elements common to this diversity of practices is the shared perception of confronting the hostility, fear, and prejudice

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the religions to decide whether they are willing to partake in the struggle in the claims-making arena or not. Cf. Robbins, *Cults*, 121–122; Wallis, *Elementary Forms*, 9–39.

[36] In fact, the two-way arrows are an abstraction of a process which would be better illustrated in different stages, first moving towards the center and then back. See below.

[37] On the interesting and diverse history of contemporary Witchcraft see Hutton, *Triumph*; Hutton, 'Modern'.

of wider society. This perception of suspicion and even persecution is poignantly expressed in the myth of the "Burning Times", a prominent element in the folklore of the contemporary Witchcraft community.[38] It is intertwined with another myth, one which Sabina Magliocco calls 'the myth of Paleolithic Origins'.[39] These two myths are summarized as follows by Margot Adler in her classic study *Drawing Down the Moon*:

> It goes something like this: Witchcraft is a religion that dates back to Paleolithic times, to the worship of the god of the hunt and the goddess of fertility. One can see remnants of it in cave paintings and in the figurines of goddesses that are many thousands of years old. The early religion was universal. [...] When Christianity came to Europe, its inroads were slow. [...] The old rites continued in folk festivals, and for many centuries Christian policy was one of slow cooptation. [...] During the times of persecution the Church took the god of the Old Religion and—as is the habit of conquerors—turned him into the Christian devil. The Old Religion was forced underground, its only records set forth, in distorted form, by its enemies. Small families kept the religion alive and, in 1951, after the Witchcraft Laws of England were repealed, it began to surface again.[40]

This version of the prehistory of contemporary Witchcraft was first outlined by Egyptologist Margaret Murray, who in 1921 wrote *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*,[41] a very influential and widely-read book, where she espoused the view that the early modern witchcraft trials were an attempt to stamp out an ancient female fertility cult, surviving from the pre-Christian era. This view gained wide recognition in the emerging Witchcraft scene in the 1950s, after Gerald Gardner adopted it in his influential book Witchcraft Today.[42]

The "Murray Thesis" was criticized soon after *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* was published,[43] and was definitively disproved in the 1970s by several important studies of European witchcraft.[44] Since then, most practitioners of contemporary Witchcraft have seen the myth of the old times as a symbolic, mythic history of the movement, often—and in agreement with academic research—attributing the origin

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[38] Magliocco, *Witching*, 188–197.
[39] Magliocco, *Witching*, 188.
[40] Adler, *Drawing*, 45–46.
[41] Murray, *Witch-Cult*.
[42] Gardner, *Witchcraft*. Murray also provided a foreword for Gardner's book.
[43] Hutton, 'Modern', 33–36.
[44] Thomas, *Decline*, 514–519; Cohn, *Demons*, 152–161; Russell, *Witchcraft*, 41–42.

of the Witchcraft movement to Gerald Gardner.[45] Instead of seeing it as a historically accurate description of the movement's past, many contemporary Witches consider the story of the "Burning Times" to be a symbolic representation of prejudice and persecution.

Most importantly for the present purposes, the myth of the "Burning Times" provides practitioners of Witchcraft with a discourse of victimization that they can draw on, irrespective of the particular social situation in which they live. Since adherents of Witchcraft have few if any "orthodox" articles of faith, this sense of outside hostility is a crucial factor that has helped form a shared identity. This discourse also contributes to shaping the reactions of contemporary Witches in conflict situations and provides a framework for legitimation. As we now turn to the specific case of Wicca in Finland, we will see that the apparent unity in the face of outside hostility can have unforeseen consequences.

3. *Outward Legitimation: The Case of Wicca, the Media, and the State in Finland*

The hostility perceived by practitioners of contemporary Witchcraft rarely manifests itself as explicit persecution by surrounding society. More commonly, Witches are confronted with cultural stereotypes that depict them in negative terms, or strongly suggest that Witchcraft is not a "serious", bona fide religion. I will discuss two Finnish cases where practitioners of Wicca[46] have been actively engaged in legitimating their religion vis-à-vis the boundary maintaining functions of society's institutions. The first has to do with the positioning of contemporary Witchcraft in the media, both in "serious" news and in depictions in popular culture, and the Wiccans' reactions to those descriptions. Unlike the images of Wicca in popular culture, which are more or less "universal" in contemporary western media, the second case is specific to the Finnish context. It concerns the ultimately failed attempt to have Wicca registered and recognized as an official religious community in Finland.

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[45] Adler, *Drawing*, 86–87; Hutton, 'Modern', 65, 70.

[46] In the Finnish context "Wiccan" is mostly interchangeable with "Witch". Finnish practitioners differentiate between the two mainly in theory, although a few consider themselves Witches, but not Wiccans—and vice versa, although less commonly so. See Virtanen, 'Ajatuksia wiccasta'.

Recent trends in popular media have brought considerable attention to the concepts of magic and witchcraft. Because of these trends, Wiccans face two challenges. On the one hand, they want their practices to be distinguished from popular depictions of witchcraft as a set of magical techniques used for evil purposes, as in the popular teen movie *The Craft* (1996). On the other hand, Wiccans insist that their practices are religious, and thus distinct from the kind of magic popularized by Harry Potter and similar representations of witches by the entertainment industry.[47] One Wiccan explains:

> Wicca's credibility is undermined by its association with youth subculture: it is considered a trend and the practice of magic and everything that sounds exotic is highlighted. I would consider the public representations of Wicca quite flimsy: TV-series like *Charmed* and films like Harry Potter create an image of some powerful occult counterculture, not the image of religion. There is hardly any objective information on the Wiccans' Goddess or worldview (Woman, 39).

In this case, the respondent's age probably influenced her way of associating negative stereotypes of Wiccans with youth subculture. However, younger practitioners voice similar complaints. Not only do they feel that the religious aspect of Wicca is ignored, the "trendiness" of the phenomenon is also seen as a possible threat to the credibility of Witchcraft. Popular images will, in their opinion, attract "dabblers" who are only superficially interested in the religious content of Wicca. 'The recent trendiness of witchcraft is actually a disservice to Wicca. Although witchcraft has become more everyday and positive in image (which is good), it has also become more commercial and shallower, and this also attracts immature persons (Woman, 20)'.

However, not all media accounts are deemed bad by the Wiccans. In recent years more and more news reports and features have appeared, in which Wiccans speak about their religion in their own terms. Nevertheless, even in these cases Wiccans can be critical of the image projected of their movement:

> I wish that somebody would write a newspaper article where the interviewee would really look like an ordinary person, and that there would be no mention of "ritual knives" or "the witches' circle", and no needless emphasis on spells and sexuality (for example, I don't think that there is

[47] All quotes are from a survey study conducted among Finnish Wiccans and reported more fully in Hjelm, 'Legitimating Wicca'.

> anything sexual about the welcome kiss that takes place in a coven/collective ritual) (Woman, 20).

According to this respondent, media expectations and journalistic conventions tend to shape interviews even when Wiccans themselves are featured in the stories, because Wicca is routinely associated with spells and rituals. There is a widely shared sentiment among the respondents, echoed in this quote, that their movement would gain more credibility if Wiccans featured in the media resembled the "average Finn". Indeed, many Witches that have figured prominently in the media have had a distinctively "gothic" look.

Representatives of new and alternative religious movements regularly complain of being negatively represented in the media.[48] It is thus quite possible that Wiccan sensitivities make them exaggerate the extent of negative stereotyping in the media. Whether fair or not, such media images are nevertheless among the main factors that shape the self-identification of Wiccans. And as already evident in some of the above quotes, self-identification implies boundary maintenance functions *within* the movement, such as voiced doubts about the sincerity of new recruits and laments about the appearance of the public representatives of Wicca.

The second case concerns the attempt by a group of Finnish Wiccans representing different traditions within the movement to have Wicca qualify as an officially registered religion. The Finnish Free Wicca Association (SVWY ry.) applied for the status of a registered religious community in the beginning of 2001. Although Finnish legislation does not require that religious communities be officially registered, registration entails a number of benefits, notably the right to levy taxes on members for religious purposes. However, the section responsible for the registration at the Ministry of Education turned down the application on the grounds that Wicca did not fulfil the requirements of a religious community as defined in the Freedom of Religion Act. As justification the Ministry wrote:

> The community has been established for the practice of a neopagan movement called Wicca. The movement is not based on a creed, texts considered sacred, or other specified and established foundations considered sacred, but every person or group involved in the movement defines

[48] This sentiment is often voiced for quite plausible reasons. See Beckford, 'Mass media'.

> his/her/its view and ritual practice mainly by him/her/itself by combining influences from different sources. The movement's views and ritual practices are heterogeneous and fluctuating. Under these circumstances the community is not to be considered a religious community whose purpose is the public practice of religion, as defined in the 2nd clause of the Freedom of Religion Act.[49]

The Finnish Free Wicca Association appealed the decision to the Finnish Supreme Administrative Court, but their appeal was rejected. I will here refrain from discussing whether the definition of religion espoused by the Ministry of Education and formulated in the former Freedom of Religion Acts is adequate, considering the religious pluralism of contemporary society.[50] The Freedom of Religion Act of 1922, which was in effect at the time of the Wiccans' application, was amended in 2003 but the provisions regarding the definition of a religious community remained unchanged. The application process, however, has changed, and responsibility for evaluating applications has been transferred from the Ministry of Education to an independent jury which includes experts on religion representing academic scholarship. It remains to be seen whether the Finnish Free Wicca Association will try to apply again under the new law.

For the purposes of the present study, the most significant aspect of the application process was the attempt to gain public recognition of Wicca as a "true" religion. This primary goal with registration was acknowledged by several of my Wiccan respondents. As a consequence, in the overwhelmingly (if nominally) Lutheran context of Finland, the negative outcome of the application was seen by some Wiccans as a sign of prejudice on the part of the authorities. From these Wiccans' point of view, the decision reached by the authorities was affected by the negative or trivializing image of Wicca in public discourse, while the official assessment in turn legitimated that negative image.

Both academic research and the evaluations within the Pagan community have drawn attention to the fact that what was being denied in the process was the status of Wicca as a *religious community*, and not as a *religion*.[51] The application for registration presented by The Finnish Free Wicca Association was so inclusive, and accepted such a diversity of practices, that it made it difficult or even impossible for

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[49] Ministry of Education, 18 December 2001, Dnro1/901/2001.
[50] Sjöblom, 'Uskontona'.
[51] Sjöblom, 'Uskontona'; Häkkinen, 'Wiccan rekisteröinnistä'.

decision-makers to interpret Wicca as a community. The Ministry of Education's decision should be seen in this light. To summarize, when Wiccans attempted to gain legitimacy through official recognition, this led to an attempt to formulate a united identity. However, the fact that the registration process failed, served to heighten the internal divisions and boundaries erected within the movement.

4. *Inward Legitimation: The "New Rise of Tradition" and Boundary-Making within Finnish Wicca*

Although Finnish Wiccans appear united when confronted with prejudice from the outside world, an informal division has run through the movement at least since public interest in contemporary Witchcraft began to grow in the first years of the twenty-first century. In Finnish Pagan jargon, the two sides have been identified as "traditionalists" and "eclectics". The former term refers to covens tracing their origin to the Gardnerian and Alexandrian branches of Wicca,[52] while the latter refers to solitary practitioners who combine different aspects of contemporary Witchcraft and Paganism, but do not restrict themselves to any one tradition.

For many years, traditionalists and eclectics have coexisted with little friction. On the few occasions that misgivings have been raised about the authenticity of other Wiccans, this has concerned the sentiment of some older Wiccans in my study that "Wiclettes" (female Wiccans under 20) were merely drawn to Wicca by depictions of witchcraft in popular culture. Differences between the two groups have been articulated by some Wiccans when explaining how they had evolved from a solitary eclectic practitioner to a traditionalist. This kind of discourse was often tinted by a sense of finding "true" Wicca only at this point. However, such remarks were very rarely made explicitly or publicly.[53]

Although more research needs to be done in this area, there are indications that, for some Finnish Wiccans, the failed registration attempt made the perceived need for inward legitimation and boundary maintenance increasingly pressing. I have termed this phenomenon

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[52] "Gardnerian" refers to covens that draw their practices from the writings of Gerald Gardner and his followers. "Alexandrian" refers to those initiated in the (Gardner-inspired) tradition established by Alex and Maxine Sanders. See Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism*, 50.

[53] Hjelm, 'Legitimating Wicca'.

the "new rise of tradition". It is nicely illustrated by a quote from an interview with a "traditionalist" Wicca: 'I don't think everybody can call themselves Wiccan. We have a tradition. We have a doctrine. Read Gerald Gardner. He founded it all. Reading one "fluffy" [a term she used in English] book doesn't make you a Wiccan (Woman, 21)'. Her remark echoes a sentiment expressed by many traditionalists, and essentially states that in order to be a legitimate Wiccan, one should know the "classic" texts (although traditionalists will to some extent disagree on precisely what those definitive works are). Some also indicated that it was necessary to be part of a coven. In the eyes of the modern traditionalists, Gerald Gardner's teachings have supplanted the Murray thesis (which was endorsed by Gardner himself) as the legitimate source of tradition. Interestingly enough, the suggestions that Wiccans should conform to an explicit tradition and be acquainted with a canon of core texts conform very well to the complaints made by the Ministry of Education quoted earlier. It would seem that for some Wiccans, turning to tradition is a response to the authorities' refusal to grant them the status of religious community.

Returning to the contextual process model described above, the development of Wicca in Finland could be summarized in the following graphic sequence:

1) Ministry of Education & Media Professionals → Boundary Maintenance → The Claims-making Arena ← Registration Attempt & PR/Media Work ← Unified Wicca

2) Claimsmaking/Failed Registration → The "New Rise of Tradition" → Divided Wicca

Figure 2: Outward and inward legitimation of contemporary Witchcraft.

This simplified description does not take into account the effects that the definitional struggles have had on the wider society, some of which are manifested, for example, in the more recent diversification of the media discourse on contemporary Witchcraft. Nor does it take into account any changes in general public opinion, since data relevant to that question remain inconclusive. Nevertheless, it shows the interaction between public discourse and the reactions within the movement. While my study of the Finnish contemporary Witchcraft community is in many ways inconclusive, the trends mentioned here raise the issue whether a unified Witch or Wiccan community is conceivable. While all the respondents of my study seem to share the concern for Wicca

to be represented as a genuine religion, it remains to be seen whether, in the process, a Wiccan orthopraxy and orthodoxy will emerge.

5. *Conclusion*

Contemporary Witchcraft is an interesting example of how alternative religion or spirituality is legitimated in the wider social framework, and how that legitimation process "acts back" on the participants. On the one hand, struggling against negative stereotypes and misinformation, contemporary Witchcraft has changed into a more "exoteric" movement.[54] On the other hand, the same process has created new boundaries within the movement. Although it might not be appropriate to call these internal discussions "polemics" in any very dramatic sense of the term, they do show that Witchcraft is not accurately characterized by the unity that Witches themselves tend to stress, when confronted with outside polemics.

Concurrently with the Finnish case described above, Joanne Pearson[55] has suggested that the recent increase in the popularity of contemporary Witchcraft and the developments arising from this change mark a division between an "exoteric" Witchcraft and an "esoteric" Wicca, understood as an initiatory mystery religion. At a time when overall trends in religious activity point to an "invisible religion", or spirituality practiced outside of distinct religious institutions, the "esotericization" of traditionalist forms of Witchcraft will probably relegate them further to the margins of the movement. This has the effect of changing the public face of contemporary Witchcraft and can in turn be another incentive for polemics both within the movement and vis-à-vis the wider society.

Acknowledgement

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[54] Hutton, 'Modern', 50–51; Pearson, 'Wicca and Paganism', 39–44.
[55] Pearson, 'Wicca and Paganism', 43.

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