HELMUT SENG
LUCIANA GABRIELA SOARES SANTOPRETE
CHIARA O. TOMMASI (Hg.)

Formen und Nebenformen des Platonismus in der Spätantike

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Vorwort

Vielfalt ist in besonderem Maße bezeichnend für Philosophie und Religiosität der Spätantike. Zentral ist dabei der Platonismus mit seinen Formen und Nebenformen, die untereinander in mannigfacher Wechselwirkung stehen. Dies gilt nicht zuletzt mit Blick auf Strömungen und Texte, die sich als marginal oder esoterisch bezeichnen lassen, wie Gnosis, Hermetismus, Chaldaeische Orakel etc., und die Frage ihrer Abweisung oder Integration.

Diesen Themen galt das von den Herausgebern geleitete Forschungsprojekt *Il lato oscuro della Tarda Antichità. Marginalità e integrazione delle correnti esoteriche nella spiritualità filosofica dei secoli II-VI*. Aus Beiträgen zu den Arbeitstreffen, die 2013-2015 in der Villa Vigoni (Loveno di Menaggio) stattfanden, ist ein Großteil der hier vorgelegten Aufsätze hervorgegangen. Für die großzügige Förderung danken die Herausgeber der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft, der Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme und dem Centro Italo-Tedesco per l'Eccellenza Europea di Villa Vigoni. Den Verfassern der einzelnen Beiträge danken wir sehr herzlich für ihre Mitarbeit. Unser Dank gilt ferner dott.ssa Lea Niccolai, die das Register erstellt hat. Die Drucklegung dieses Bandes wurde ermöglicht durch Mittel des *Progetto di Ricerca di Ateneo 2016 (Università di Pisa) "Forme e rappresentazioni del sacro nel mondo mediterraneo antico"*. Auch dafür unseren Dank.

Während der letzten Arbeiten am Manuskript dieses Bandes hat uns die Nachricht vom allzu frühen Tod unseres hochgeschätzten Kollegen Zeke Mazur erreicht. Wir gedenken seiner in stiller Trauer.

Frankfurt am Main – Paris – Pisa, August 2016

Helmut Seng
Luciana Gabriela Soares Santoprete
Chiara Ombretta Tommasi

Inhalt

Chiara Ombretta Tommasi

Some Reflections on Antique and Late Antique Esotericism: between Mainstream and Counterculture

The underlying project of this collection of essays, which ideally represents a sequel to the miscellaneous volume edited by Helmut Seng in 2013,[1] is to explore the multifarious possibilities of ancient esotericism. This entails establishing how some 'esoteric' or marginal currents, that is, only partially in line with mainstream culture, permeated late antique spirituality (2nd-6th centuries) and interacted with the major philosophy of the period, Platonism, to be then either rejected or incorporated into the predominant trend. Concepts such as identity, controversy, orthodoxy, heresy, spiritual exercises, and ritualization are looked at, in order to demonstrate that the relationship between philosophy and religion in late antiquity benefitted from the so-called esoteric aspects, which were extremely prevalent in the imperial period. Rather than looking for an encyclopaedic body of knowledge, emphasis was placed on themes that presented consistency and continuity, in tandem with a diachronic and interdisciplinary approach. As shall be discussed in detail later on, the development of Platonism in late antiquity is crucial for an understanding of the dynamics involved in what is now labelled in the academy as 'Western esotericism', namely

> "a distinct form of spirituality extending from Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism in the early Christian era up until the present. Diffused by Arab and Byzantine culture into medieval Europe, these esoteric currents experienced a marked revival through the Florentine neo-Platonists of the late fifteenth century. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, esoteric spirituality was carried by Renaissance magic, Christian Kabbalah, astrology, alchemy, German *Naturphilosophie,* theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry until the modern occult revival in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the Theosophy of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky played an important role. Alongside and within this Western tradition, Arabic and Jewish currents have played a major role since the Latin Middle Ages. Arabic astrology, alchemy

[1] Seng (ed.).

> and natural science entered the medieval West through southern Italy and Spain from the tenth century onwards. In the fifteenth-century Jewish kabbalists in Spain and Italy assisted the Christian assimilation of Kabbalah, which henceforth became a major strand of European esoteric spirituality and thought. Accounts of spiritual ascent, angelic hierarchies and religious experience evidence strong commonalities between the Jewish, Christian and Islamic esoteric traditions".[2]

Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that, probably inspired or favoured by a certain *Zeitgeist*, recent decades have witnessed the growth of a new academic field, namely, the study of Western esotericism. This, however, mostly focuses on the modern age, as its founding fathers and the methodological grounds of this science testify to. In this respect, it should also be stressed that, together with influential (although non-academic) personalities such as Frances Yates (1899-1981),[3] or François Secret, who was the first scholar to hold the chair of *Histoire de l'ésotérisme chrétien* at the Parisian *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in 1964,[4] some seminal premises on the nature and character of Western esotericism were made in the Sixties by prominent Italian historians of philosophy such as Eugenio Garin[5] and Enrico Castelli.[6] All these scholars were specialists of the Renaissance and shaped their paradigm by analysing how a deeply Christianized society interacted with the remnants of pagan culture, and in particular with its more peculiar offshoots (mythology, astrology, occultism, magic), by treating it like a 'golden chain' stretching from antiquity down to the contemporary era.[7] Nevertheless,

[2] This eminently clear and concise statement concerning the topics covered by Western esotericism and their pre-modern roots is taken from the homepage of the Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism (http://centres.exeter.ac.uk/exeseso/, retrieved July 2016).

[3] For further information cf. Jones. On Yates' scholarly legacy cf. Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm". Yates' book on Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition was first published in 1964.

[4] Secret, a prominent historian of Christian kabbalists (including practical aspects such as theurgy and alchemy) and Guillaume Postel in particular, was born in Chambéry (1911) and died in Paris (2003). As remembered in Brach's obituary, Secret was in contact with Enrico Castelli and Cesare Vasoli (a pupil of Garin). For his own views on esotericism cf. Secret.

[5] Audisio - Savorelli (ed.) provide a critical evaluation of Garin's scholarship.

[6] Cf. Castelli, which represents a summary of his views on esotericism. For a biographical sketch cf. Del Noce - Olivetti, with further bibliography.

[7] In this respect mention can be made of the seminal essay by Wind and of Warburg's research.

at least as far as Italy is concerned, despite the authoritativeness of these historians of philosophy (and, in the case of Castelli, his interest in spirituality and his Christian background), the very concept of an academic approach to esotericism and the idea of studying it as a specific subject came up against strong opposition from both the Catholic Church and the Italian Communist Party, who, each in its own way, exerted a deep influence on the academy. Whereas Catholic scholarship viewed esotericism with deep suspicion for its alleged links with occultism or magic, and thereby neglected the substantial contribution to its formation on the part of important Christian figures, among whom Agostino Steuco and (later on) Jean Baptiste François Pitra[8], the biases of the Communist Party derived from its intrinsic materialism, which could not accept these sources of an assumed irrationalism, or the penchant for mysticism and spiritualism.[9] More in general, the question of the acceptance of esotericism as an object of study in the academy represents a paradigmatic case of the acceptance of a non-neutral subject of studies, the perception of which had often been distorted and marginalized.[10] The same diffidence that in some academic milieus still continues surrounding this word provides a further example of such an attitude.[11]

In the Eighties, Secret's chair, whose original name was perhaps suggested by the philosopher (himself inspired in his youth by perennialism) Henry Corbin,[12] changed its name, becoming *Histoire des courants éso-*

[8] On whom cf. Laurant, *Symbolisme*.

[9] Cf. the introductory considerations put forward by Cazzaniga. Suspicions against esoteric studies are also raised by those who tend to see in esoteric currents and authors the inspirers or the avatars of some extreme right movements (cf. already Jesi). A similar case is represented by some attitudes concerning Indo-European studies, as in the well-known Dumézil affair (on which cf. Eribon's reconstruction). It should be clear, however, that scholarly research does not automatically imply endorsement or legitimization.

[10] Similarly, Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, discusses some attitudes towards esotericism, retracing their roots to what he calls either a 'religionist' approach (a positive one, based on personal experience), or a 'reductionistic' approach originating in the post-Enlightenment criticism of superstition; the Dutch scholar stresses how both these attitudes are controversial, insofar as they are mainly based on ideological (and therefore non-historical) positions.

[11] Cf. Pasi, "The Problems ..." 202: "the validity and the relative importance of this field is far from being unanimously accepted even within the academy, despite the relative success that the field has encountered so far in its process of academic institutionalization."

[12] Corbin (1903-1978) is mainly known for his studies on Islamic philosophy and in particular its esoteric currents and authors, such as Suhrawardi: cf. Amir-Moezzi -

tériques et mystiques dans l'Europe moderne et contemporaine, therefore focussing also on mysticism and the contemporary period.[13] In the meantime, a new generation of scholars, among whom Wouter Hanegraaff, currently the holder of an appointed chair in Amsterdam,[14] came to embody the subject as we have come to know it. Recent decades have seen an increasing number of publications in the field, among which the journal *Aries*, launched in 2001,[15] its homonymous monograph series (whose first volume was published in 2006),[16] not to mention the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*[17] and several other books, which sometimes aim at reassessing the allegedly overly historicist approach provided by the earliest theorists.[18] Finally, there are academic

Jambet - Lory (ed.), together with some useful material collected from the webpage www.amiscorbin.org, dedicated to Corbin's life and legacy. Together with Eliade, Scholem and others, Corbin took an active part in the Eranos Colloquia at Ascona, on which cf. Wasserstrom and Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm" and "The power ..." 265. Cf. also Hakl.

[13] This coincided with Secret's retirement, followed by the appointment of Antoine Faivre in 1979.

[14] The Chair of *Geschiedenis van de hermetische filosofie en verwante stromingen* (History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents) at the University of Amsterdam was created in 1999 on the initiative of Rosalie Basten, an enthusiastic reader of Frances Yates: cf. Hanegraaff - Pijnenburg (ed.). It is worth remembering that Amsterdam also hosts the Ritman Library, a private collection of books and resources dedicated to esotericism (http://www.ritmanlibrary.com/) and that one of the most important Dutch scholars in the field of Early Christianity, Hermetism and Gnosticism was Gilles Quispel (1916-2006), who had been influenced by Jungian doctrines and whose interest in esotericism became more and more evident towards the end of his life. In addition to Amsterdam and Paris, another university chair on the same subject was hosted at the University of Exeter (its founder and holder Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke died in 2012, although the Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism still continues its activity).

[15] Another important academic journal, especially in France, is *Politica Hermetica*, which is sometimes connoted as more 'militant'.

[16] Cf. http://www.brill.com/aries.

[17] Hanegraaff - Faivre - van den Broek - Brach (ed.).

[18] Such a deconstructive approach is patently seen in von Stuckrad, *Locations*, who, in disagreement with Hanegraaff, prefers to apply the Foucauldian notion of 'discourse' or dynamics, claiming that "talking of esoteric discourse [instead of esotericism] ... puts the emphasis on the discursive operations that are at work in Western culture, including its academic study", so that "we can relinquish the term [esotericism] altogether and will start talking about constructions of identities of Europe and 'the West'" (59 and 64). This risks seeming quite nominalistic a discussion, if, as remarked by Stausberg 222f., "interestingly, however, despite his theoretical turn,

groups and associations, among whom the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, founded in 2005.[19] In particular, the seminal and challenging monograph published by Wouter Hanegraaff in Cambridge four years ago represented a turning point for studies in Western esotericism:[20] Hanegraaff engages in a debate mainly with his predecessors (Faivre and, more recently, von Stuckrad), contributing to a critical reformulation of a new exegetical paradigm, which is able to offer a methodological reflection on such a new field of interest, with the accent on a study of esotericism *per se* and its intrinsic value as a cultural phenomenon.[21]

Partially neglecting the original etymology of the word, which likewise refers to a secret universal doctrine, whose tenets are transmitted only to initiates,[22] both Hanegraaff and von Stuckrad emphasize, although in different terms, the idea of considering esoteric doctrines as a bulk of ideas excluded or marginalized by mainstream culture: Hanegraaff stresses the notion of esotericism as "rejected knowledge" or "waste-basket", which functioned as a negative recipient for what main-

von Stuckrad's book exclusively engages with the well-established topics of so-called Western esotericism in the medieval and early-modern periods such as alchemy, astrology, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, and *prisca teologia*; in fact, I cannot see that *Locations of Knowledge* anywhere goes beyond the canon of topics, texts, and protagonists covered by so-called Western esotericism. Yet, if the shift from the noun to the adjective has any strategic and theoretical value, in my understanding it should precisely consist in enlarging the scope of analysis: esoteric modes of discourse could potentially be identified in domains not covered by the 'historical materials' studied under the umbrella of so-called Western esotericism; rather than narrowing the field, then, the discursive approach could potentially expand it considerably, even if *Locations of Knowledge* does not cross the boundaries to these potential new fields". Cf. also Hanegraaff, "The power ..." 266, who convincingly defends the validity of a historical-critical approach.

[19] www.esswe.org, retrieved July 2016.

[20] Cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*.

[21] Cf. also the discussion on Hanegraaff's book in the monographic issue of *Religion* 48 (2013), with the contributions of Filoramo, Hammer, Otto, Pasi, Stausberg, and a reply by Hanegraaff himself ("Textbooks ..." and "The power ...").

[22] The Greek polymath Lucian is credited with having coined the adjective ἐσωτερικός (Vit. Auct. 26), *à propos* of Aristotle: the term was supposed to correspond to ἐξωτερικός, that is, the doctrines to be divulged outside the school (similarly, the same opposition recurs in Clement of Alexandria, Origen and elsewhere). Iamblichus, Vit. Pyth. 17, 72 p. 52, 7 N. names οἱ ἐσωτερικοί the disciples of Pythagoras (after their five years of initiation, on which see *infra* n. 66). Greg. Nyss., C. Eun. II 315 p. 318, 20 J. speaks of ἐσωτερική τε καὶ ἀπόρρητος μύησις.

stream culture perceived as unacceptable or illegitimate and was therefore to be rejected; similarly, von Stuckrad prefers to employ the typical post-structuralist category of "otherness" and places under the umbrella of Western esotericism a series of phenomena (such as alchemy, astrology and magic) that have become "distanced away", or expurgated from the *corpus* of legitimate knowledge, and which therefore function as a "significant Other" of post-Enlightenment Western identities. At the same time, von Stuckrad broadens the notion of esotericism, which he does not relegate to religion only, by subsuming it under the more general issues of identity formation and competing knowledge claims.

However, mainly because of the scholarly background of the majority of the afore-mentioned scholars, the shaping of the discipline was characterized from the very beginning by a strong accent on the modern and contemporary age, so that nowadays most people tend to identify the academic study of esotericism as a field covering almost exclusively these periods. In particular, Antoine Faivre, according to whom it is only on the eve of modernity, *i.e.* at the end of the Middle Ages, that movements such as Hermeticism, Christian kabbalah, or *occulta philosophia*, manage to gain their own independence and autonomy, proposed an influential historical-typological approach where esoteric doctrines are considered coincident with other epoch-making events such as the Scientific Revolution or the Reformation.[23] Faivre's approach, in relying on the simultaneous compresence of four elements that define esotericism, has been recently questioned, both on theoretical grounds[24] and, what is

[23] Conversely, Faivre, *L'ésotérisme* stresses the original meaning: according to him, such a definition could be useful either for Christians, who were characterized by instances of reformation and renovation, and for other currents, who did not admit that Christianity alone could be the repository of a universal prime wisdom. In addition, according to Faivre's approach, to be defined as such, esoteric currents must share a fixed set of characteristics, namely "correspondences" (*i.e.* the presence of symbolic or real correspondences between beings within the universe, such as the idea of macro- and microcosm, or the doctrine of astral influences); "living Nature" (*i.e.* envisioning nature as endowed with its own life force, which is declined in a plural or complex form); "imagination" (in the form of tools that provide access to a superhuman realm, by means of rituals, symbolic images, mandalas, intermediary spirits); "transmutation" (that is, the spiritual experience of transformation typical of the attainment of gnosis). To these four characteristics he added two secondary ones, namely "concordance" (a root from which all world religions and spiritual practices stem) and "transmission" (the idea that esoteric disciplines can be taught by a master to a disciple). Cf. also Faivre, "Kocku von Stuckrad ...".

[24] For example by von Stuckrad, *Locations*, who mainly criticizes the historical approach, and by Hanegraaff, who tries to find a new model based on reason, faith and

more significant for the present discussion, for its assumption that similar dynamics of inclusion and exclusion may be observed in other religious contexts all over the world. Marco Pasi, in particular, has suggested a convincing supersedence of the previous models (mainly, Faivre's and those of von Stuckrad and Hanegraaff), based on the assumption of a more flexible scheme in which the notion of simultaneity is abandoned in favour of an inclusive approach that privileges the description rather than the simple definition.[25] This would be quite helpful, if one considers that, rather than a unitary mass, 'esotericism' often appears to be "the end result of countless individuals involving themselves in polemics over a number of wildly diverging topics", or a "very diverse set of practices – defended or rejected for very different reasons by very different groups of people at very different times –" that "ends up constituting a diffuse 'something' with few if any internal characteristics that serve to define it",[26] whereas what appears as consistency is only the projection or the reflection of later generations. In this sense, Hanegraaff's insistence on the "grand narrative" scheme (namely, stating that many interpretations of esotericism and esotericism itself are the result of how the concept was shaped and perceived) is surely a brilliant, provocative, and to some extent paradoxical attempt at interpreting these phenomena under different lenses (those of the perennialist theologians of the Renaissance; those of the Counter-Reformed Catholics or Lutheran theorists in the Baroque; those of the lay philosophers of the Enlightenment, and so on). Its seems unnecessary, however, to go so far as to consider Western esotericism

gnosis, adding to the discussion the notion of cosmotheism, which he borrows from Assmann. Cf. also Faivre - Hanegraaff (ed.) – a volume that mainly deals with theoretical questions – and Goodrick-Clarke.

[25] Pasi, "Il problema ..." 221-224. Cf. also Pasi, "The Problems ..." 209: "the question is whether it can by itself solve the theoretical problem of 'defining' Western esotericism as an object of research for us scholars today. It certainly tells us how the concept of esotericism has taken shape historically, but it does not tell us by itself if anything at all exists behind this historical process of categorization, and – if something does indeed exist – what is it. ... Is it an historical fact, or is it just a mental construction of the authors who have written about it?" Moreover Pasi convincingly states that some risks are implied in shifting the focus from the object of study *per se* to a historiographical analysis of how the object has been traditionally conceptualized, constructed, and therefore 'essentialized' (204). The debate on definition recalls the terminological issues involved in modern scholarship on Gnosticism; cf., for two alternative perspectives, Bianchi (ed.) and M. A. Williams.

[26] Hammer 242. Cf. also Hanegraaff, "The power ..." 258.

not as a historical reality as such, but as an imaginary or discursive construct that participates in something that seems to be real.[27]

At the same time, broadening the taxonomy of similar processes of 'rejecting knowledge' in related historical and religious contexts, which can be either previous in time or different in space (as in the case of Antiquity, Arabic and/or Jewish sources, or in Buddhism and Daoism, and so on), obviously leads to the rejection of 'Western esotericism' as an analytical category; insofar as it is a discursive term, 'Western esotericism' is bound to its early-modern and modern European history,[28] although one must not overly push the criticism of an alleged Western-oriented idea of religion that takes normative versions of Christianity as its point of reference.

Once this idea of rejection, marginalization or even 'otherness' is accepted[29] when considering the ancient world, one is faced with a lavish array of doctrines or teachings often conceived of as an alternative to official religious traditions and addressed to a small group of adepts or initiates. Therefore, they come very close to the areas pertaining to Western esotericism and certainly fall – almost simultaneously in most cases – within Faivre's four (or six) categories: magical papyri, Orphic fragments, the *Chaldaean Oracles*, alchemic or astrological literature and the bulk of Hermetic and Gnostic traditions, many of which had already been investigated in detail at the beginning of the twentieth century by scholars that followed a *religionsgeschichtlich* approach. Figures such as Richard Wünsch, Otto Weinreich, Richard Reitzenstein, Eduard Norden, Wilhelm Bousset, Albrecht Dieterich, to mention only a few, in fact, contributed to a deeper understanding of Greco-Roman religion, especially in its most aberrant and unsettling fringes, as well as providing a more in-depth investigation of the study of popular traditions. Their

[27] Cf. the remarks put forward by Hanegraaff, "The power ..." 259: "I make no attempt to write the history (or even a history) of Western esotericism: I have tried to write a history of how scholars and intellectuals have imagined it, and why." At the same time he rightly rejects (255) an over-Foucauldian approach, in particular against discourse theory, by means of the sound conclusions of Marchand xxi: "Too frequently, discourses are identified by selectively assembling lines and phrases from disparate texts, and in the attempt to make power relations paramount, modern commentators are led to pick out metaphors or generalizations that have more to do with our own interests than with the authors' original ideas'."

[28] Otto 239. On the notion of 'broadening' cf. recently von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism"; Bogdan - Djurdjevic; Asprem.

[29] An interesting survey of the categorization of "otherness" in Antiquity is provided by Kahlos (ed.).

approach was essentially a comparative one, without neglecting the great classical literary tradition, and without creating a sharp division between religion and texts. In that way, Droysen's well known conception of Hellenism was widened and attention was given to obscure late antique documents, which until then had been, so to say, overlooked by traditional scholarship.[30] A generation later, other scholars, to different degrees, fell under the sway of theosophy, traditionalism, or psychoanalysis: such is the case of Eric Robertson Dodds, who stressed the most irrational (*i.e.* mystical and occult) elements of late antique culture, comparing them to Tantric Buddhism and stating, in lapidary sentences, that for the world-weary late antique pagan aristocracy, whose hopes had been overtaken by the triumph of Christianity, there was no other antidote than seeking some kind of vain shelter in theurgy and irrationalism.[31] Accordingly, it is interesting to consider Dodds' personal experience, which started out with a deep involvement in esoteric movements such as that of the Golden Dawn, and ended up in radical scepticism, as stated in his fascinating autobiography, *Missing Persons*.[32] Similarly, Hans Lewy, the author of a seminal study on the *Chaldaean Oracles*, was deeply involved at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, together with Gershom Scholem and Hans Jonas (masterful scholars, as everyone knows, of esoteric Judaism and Gnosis respectively) in a cultural movement fated to influence their concern for spiritual or mystical trends.[33] Thus, most of this research still represents an invaluable contribution in the field of esoteric studies, even though the concept is not openly acknowledged. Moreover, new light can be cast on such authors and works by considering the scholarly progress made in recent decades and especially the recent crop of studies concerning late antiquity, a period that appears particularly favourable to the investigation of esoteric trends, because, as has been acknowledged since Nock's monumental essay on the idea of *Conversion*, this epoch is characterized by an increasing tendency towards forms of individual or personal religion, which affect the official ones, as well as by foreign

[30] Cf. the considerations we put forward in "Per un bilancio ..." 11-19; cf. also the historical reconstruction offered by Rudolph.
[31] Dodds, *The Greeks* 282-311; *Pagan and Christian*; *The Ancient Concept* 157-210.
[32] Cf. Dodds, *Missing Persons* 60-64. A comprehensive portrait of Dodds is offered by Hankey (with further bibliography). On magic and its role in the neo-pagan and theosophical revival of the Nineteenth century cf. Hutton and Susanetti.
[33] The story of this circle has been thoroughly reconstructed by Zadoff.

influences culminating with the introduction of new rituals.[34] This flourishing of spiritual movements, which greatly differ from each other insofar as the number of testimonies and their impact are concerned, also affected philosophical schools, which underwent a radical reshaping. Sometimes these trends were perceived as counterculture, or as forms incorporating elements of *Popularphilosophie*[35] or even as the "underworld of Platonism".[36] As often happens in esoteric currents, the contradiction and tension between trivialized practices (magic, superstition) and, on the other hand, sophisticated doctrines and an elitism or secrecy reserved for close groups or restricted circles is remarkable.

In this respect, we cannot but welcome the launching of the website directed by Sarah Veale and Dylan Burns, who is the author of an interesting book that takes into account the relationship between Gnosticism and Platonism, together with the penchant for the Orient in antiquity.[37] According to the homepage of the site,[38] the Network for the Study of Ancient Esotericism (NSEA) is a thematic network associated with the ESSWE, specialized in the study of esoteric phenomena of the ancient period and providing contact for specialists of ancient esoteric thought, history, and literature. This website is mainly intended as a resource for scholars and students, who can therefore exchange ideas, notes and references, coordinate study and workshops with other working groups or individuals, and provide a collation of the many resources online that can serve as aids to the study of this fascinating and difficult material (dictionaries, textual corpora, blogs, etc.).[39] Most importantly, one of the first aims of the website is to introduce scholarship on ancient esotericism to students of Western Esotericism, because "while the ancient sources (Gnostic, theurgic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, etc.) of Western Esotericism possess enormous importance for the development of esoteric

[34] Cf. Nock, with the methodological remarks of Mazza, Price, and Casadio, "Ancient mystic religion ...". Cf. also the recent reassessment by Mastrocinque.
[35] Theiler 75-81 [= 111-116].
[36] Dillon 384. This expression was forestalled by Kroll 355, who attributed "unterirdisches Dasein" to the *Chaldaean Oracles* and similar texts. The original core of the present volume, namely a three-year project financed by the French Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, the German DFG and the Italian Villa Vigoni Foundation (2012-2015), bore the evocative title of "Il lato oscuro della Tarda Antichità. Marginalità e integrazione delle correnti esoteriche nella spiritualità filosofica dei secoli II-VI", which was chosen with this and other similar characterisations in mind.
[37] Burns.
[38] http://ancientesotericism.org/, retrieved July 2016.
[39] For a similar approach cf. Soares Santoprete.

currents from the fourteenth century onwards, there remains only a minimum of interaction between the antiquity experts and their (proto)-modern colleagues".[40]

This is a central point, which has been very recently outlined in a brief article by Kocku von Stuckrad. After having stated that "the question whether it is useful to apply the term 'esotericism' to sources from the ancient and medieval periods has become a matter of ideology in the study of esotericism" – a fact that appears strange "because such a differentiation has never occurred with reference to closely related terms such as 'secrecy' or 'mysticism'" – von Stuckrad polemically addresses those "scholars of esotericism" who "habitually underestimate the continuities between 'late antiquity', the 'Middle Ages', and the 'Renaissance', which leads them to a distorted understanding of the Renaissance as the 'birthplace of esotericism'", observing that Hermeticism, magic and astrology and other concepts that gained influence in the fifteenth century had their origin in those 'dark Middle Ages', for "the period between 600 and 1300 was a highly productive – and pluralistic – time in terms of philosophical, scientific, and religious discourses".[41] Stressing his idea of esoteric knowledge as counter-knowledge, von Stuckrad notes that "ancient cultures provide a rich spectrum of polemical discourses of knowledge in philosophy and religion, most of them prefiguring the discursive constellations of subsequent centuries", as well as "the many cross-fertilizations and polemical distinctions that have determined European history".[42] Notwithstanding some interesting hints (expressed however in *à la page* Foucauldian terms, such as "the ancient world is a huge imaginal space" or, in more trivial words, "a strong identity marker"),[43] this approach runs the risk of falling victim to its polemical mood, not to mention a certain oversimplification[44] and the unfortunate recent tendency to neglect secondary literature.

[40] Quotation is taken from the website's homepage.
[41] Von Stuckrad, "Ancient esotericism ..." 16f.
[42] Von Stuckrad, "Ancient esotericism ..." 18.
[43] Von Stuckrad, "Ancient esotericism ..." 18.
[44] For example in the conclusion (19): "the ancient world is alive in the present. We need an integral approach to see the many unexpected continuities, breaks, and shifting identities in the construction of esoteric knowledge through the centuries". Moreover, the present writer thinks that the insistence on esotericism as a modern phenomenon is no matter of ideology, but is the natural result of the academic formation of the first scholars of the discipline. Remarkably, among the editors of *Brill's Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (n. 17) is a prominent Dutch scholar of Late Antiquity and Early Christianity, such as Roelof van den Broek.

Indeed, the idea of retracing the roots of modern esotericism back to ancient times is not a new one. For example, the miscellaneous volume on Esotericism edited by Gian Mario Cazzaniga in *Storia d'Italia Einaudi* also brought together various studies on aspects of esotericism in ancient civilizations, such as that of the Persians, the Chaldaeans and the Egyptians.[45] These forms of esotericism were to be viewed as the repositories of a secret wisdom not only by Greeks and Romans but also by their Byzantine and Westerner heirs over the following centuries. Anticipated by Georgios Gemistos Plethon, such an idea was developed mainly during the Renaissance under the names of *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis*, representing the basis of Christian esotericism: while *prisca theologia* indicates that the true knowledge was to be sourced prior to Greek philosophy and lay hidden in ancient sages such as Zoroaster, Hermes, Orpheus, and Moses, the tenets of *philosophia perennis* are more centred on the continuity of the transmission of this wisdom, a transmission that is perennial and never-ending. In this regard, Wouter Hanegraaff offers a thorough evaluation of Agostino Steuco, himself a bishop and librarian at the Bibliotheca Vaticana, who published his ten-volume *De perenni philosophia* (1540), wherein he displays a very open-minded approach, by taking into account many of the so-called pagan oracles, *i.e.* the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the fragments of a type of late Christian theosophy, nowadays known as the *Tübinger Theosophie*, which in turn transmits Porphyrian fragments. Steuco was followed by Francesco Patrizi who in his *Nova de universis philosophia* (1593) relies heavily on Chaldaean and Hermetic texts, editions of which are included as separate fascicles. Although starting from different premises, Plethon's nostalgic penchant for paganism seems to fall along the same lines.[46]

Hanegraaff labels this mass of knowledge with the brilliant formula, 'Platonic Orientalism',[47] which he borrowed from John Walbridge,[48] and considers how the Christian authors of the Renaissance developed their own conception of it by means of the particular interpretation Platonism underwent in late antiquity. Although this label has been questioned, especially on the grounds that the concept of Orientalism is ambivalent, it

[45] In the same line cf. also the miscellaneous volume by Scarpi - Zago.
[46] Cf. Tambrun's important book on Plethon. On Steuco and Patrizi cf. Moreschini (with further references).
[47] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism* 12-17.
[48] Cf. Walbridge (dedicated to Suhrawardi, an author that significantly had been the object of Corbin's research).

nonetheless seems worthy of being examined and maintained, provided it is borne in mind that, as always happens, each definition runs the risk of being subjected to generalization, or of falling into vagueness. For example, Marco Pasi states that this definition risks flattening a complex of currents and traditions in an alleged exclusivism or predominance of Platonism to the detriment of the others;[49] on the other hand, Giovanni Filoramo has called into question recent debate around Cumont's notion of Oriental religions,[50] by providing further dimensions to the "'colonialist' vision of a strange and alien East, both fascinating and disturbing".[51] This last point, a patent allusion to Edward Saïd's controversial concept of 'Orientalism', may be nuanced by taking into account the ambiguity and complexity involved in a concept such as that of the Orient, as well as the critical reception of Saïd:[52] the idea of an 'alluring', 'seducing' or

[49] Pasi, "The Problems ..." 207.

[50] Filoramo 214: Cumont's statements were based on the idea mainly derived from an evolutionary scheme whose peak was represented by Christianity and the superseding of polytheism. More in general, the idea of 'oriental religions' has been subjected to a transformation, both in the sense of 'oriental', which appears too inclusive and generalizing, and in that of 'religion', compared to which the word 'cult' has become preferable (since the 1981 volume edited by Bianchi - Vermaseren; cf. also Turcan's reassessment, together with the volume edited by Bonnet - Pirenne-Delforge - Praet, with further references). Further discussion of this topic is provided by Smith 107, who notes that the choice between 'cult' and 'religion' is not without important implications in the comparison of Christianity and other ancient religions; and by Cerutti, "Operatori ...". Nevertheless the term 'oriental religions' can still be used as a practical way of labelling the spread of a large number of religious forms of worship during late Hellenism and the imperial age. Perhaps the most significant testament to this term's success is the well-known collection "Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain" (EPRO), founded and directed by the late Maarten J. Vermaseren for the publisher E. J. Brill in Leiden (a reconstruction of this collection is provided by Pailler).

[51] Filoramo 214.

[52] A sound criticism of Saïd is offered in Casadio's cogently argued article "Studying ...". Cf. also MacKenzie and Pasi, "The Problems ..." 206-208, who deals at greater length with this notion, citing other voices in the debate about Orientalism (among which King, Turner, Varisco). It is however worth remembering that "l'attrait de l'Orient fait partie intégrante de la conscience occidentale, et l'orientalisme n'est pas seulement ce qu'en a fait Edward Saïd, en insistant sur ses rapports avec un impérialisme qui ne naîtrait que plus tard" (Stroumsa, rev. Stausberg 483). Cf. also Hanegraaff's remarks ("The power ..." 261): "the latter [Saïd] may have tended to claim a monopoly over the term 'Orientalism,' but in fact it is doubtful whether the supposedly universal notion of a reified 'East' versus 'West' was ever so universal even in the 19th century. Therefore I reserve the right to define 'Platonic Orientalism'

even 'threatening' East definitely finds its roots (from Antiquity onwards) in the political confrontation between the two worlds, but a much more positive vision of the Orient (summarized in the icastic motto *ex oriente lux*) could usually be found in different contexts.[53] In this sense, it can be said that already in classical antiquity the East functioned as a cultural construct, independently of actual geography and, in some respects, was imbued with the characteristics of "otherness".[54] Therefore,

in a precise and non-essentialist manner if this helps me better understand what was going on in Late Antiquity or the Renaissance. ... I understand and appreciate that the legacy of (post)colonialism has caused an extreme sensitivity towards any term that has 'Orient' or 'Orientalism' in it, but I believe we should not allow ourselves to be held hostage forever, in our terminological choices". His considerations about allegedly "old" secondary literature authors are also meaningful: "I want to defend my use of some older publications by authors such as Hopfner, Festugière, and Dörrie. As anybody will see who looks them up, they are treasure troves of straightforward factual information, with exhaustive lists of erudite references to the relevant classical sources. Such information simply does not get outdated; and referencing such authors does not imply that one adopts their essentializing biases. As for Festugière, it is almost impossible for modern scholars to miss his obvious biases and blind spots – they more or less jump off the page for us – but his *Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* still remains an indispensable monument of scholarship that no scholar of ancient Hermetism can afford to ignore. ... the problem with many recent discussions is precisely the fact that so much of the modern debate about Orientalism has been hijacked by post-Saïdian discourse, leading to a one-sided obsession with 'East–West' essentialisms that (important though they certainly are) are simply not central to my concerns."

[53] Among the many titles that might be cited, I wish to draw attention to two interesting, albeit lesser known works: Marelli and Maggi - Poli - Pucciarelli (ed.) – both of which are mainly concerned with modern times.

[54] For this reason we are not entirely convinced by the statements of Pasi, "The Problems ..." 206, when he claims that Orientalism, despite having its roots in the past, is an essentially modern phenomenon, adding that "the romantic vision of a unique 'Orient,' where all the differences of specific cultures merge and vanish into a single essentialized entity structurally opposed to its counterpart, the 'West,' is in fact much more modern than it may appear to us today"; likewise, Pasi criticizes Belayche's supposed ambiguity, for she does not consistently distinguish between the Romans' perceptions of populations residing in the East of the Empire and modern concepts of the 'Orient'. However, "even if I find the term 'Platonic Orientalism' problematic", he continues, "this does not mean that the baby within it should be thrown out with the bathwater. The point is that 'Orientalism' here really should stand for the admiration and idealization of alien cultures. That such a cultural phenomenon was present in Antiquity, and that it was clearly associated with the formation of what Hanegraaff calls the 'ancient-wisdom narrative,' nobody denies. ... Applying a concept such as 'Orientalism' (Platonic or otherwise) to the

the Persian Magi, the Chaldaean astrologers, the Indian Brahmans, the Egyptian priests, the Celtic Druids and some Hebrew sages were paralleled to Greek philosophers and perceived as bearers of an original (although imperfect) wisdom and a fundamental revelation, from which Greek culture itself could drink. This is also clearly shown in the ancient accounts that consider Pythagoras as a disciple of Zaratas (*i.e.* Zoroaster) or that mention the Magi at Plato's funeral.[55] This well-known penchant for 'Oriental' sources or for their inspiring aura of exoticism can be also integrated with the corresponding idea of the dignity and value of the 'barbarian philosophy', a term proudly employed by early Christian authors to stress the original elements in their speculation.[56]

In this context the figure of the Middle Platonic philosopher Numenius of Apamea plays a significant role: not only does he openly refer to those wise men as forerunners of Greek philosophy in fragment 1 des Places,[57] but he notably labels Plato as being nothing else but "Moses speaking Attic Greek"[58] Furthermore, the city of Apamea in Syria was at the crossroad of cultures and, two centuries earlier another philosopher, Posidonius, had tried to hybridize Platonism and Stoicism.[59] Numenius and his age, which witnessed the flourishing of Gnostic schools and the composition of the *Chaldaeans Oracles*, fated to be the "Bible of Neo-

material studied by Hanegraaff serves only to obscure the fact that the authors creating their various versions of 'ancient-wisdom narratives' were not, for instance, using what they considered to be ancient Egyptian, or even Persian, traditions because they were 'Oriental,' or even simply 'exotic,' but because they served their specific purposes" ("The Problems ..." 208). Cf. the remarks in Hanegraaff, "The power ..." 259: "wisdom from the East as imagined by Platonizing authors, regardless of where they lived or where they came from".

[55] Kingsley; Gnoli.

[56] Cf. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy*.

[57] Similar considerations on the origins of philosophy can be traced in Apuleius' *Florida* (15) and in the *Elenchos* attributed to Hippolytus (I 1) as well as in the prologue of Diogenes Laertius; more in general, a deep fascination with the East shines out in the works of Plutarch, Apollonius of Tyana, and Celsus. Among modern scholars, in addition to Burns cf. Hopfner; Festugière, *La Révélation* 19-44 ("Les prophètes de l'Orient"); Puech; Baltes; Burkert (some of them mentioned by Hanegraaff himself); although often quoted in this context, Momigliano's essay seems somewhat overrated. Cf. recently Aufrère - Möri (ed.).

[58] Cf. fr. 8 des Places, with the considerations of Edwards, who, however, adopts a rather sceptical attitude towards Numenius' alleged knowledge of Jews and Judaism.

[59] This perspective was much more emphasized in the first half on the past century, as the classical monograph of Reinhardt attests to.

platonists",[60] are of primary relevance for our discourse. Yet, many of the authors mentioned by Hanegraaff as representative of what he labels "Platonic Orientalism" were actually born in the Eastern part of the Empire and in regions close to Syria; however, I suppose that the implied idea is the gradually developed penchant for 'irrational' elements that accentuate the pre-eminence of mysticism and revelation over rational, philosophical discourse.[61] Later Neoplatonism, from Iamblichus onwards, is unanimously acknowledged as being inspired by a mystical-theurgical line.[62]

Moreover, there was a tendency to amalgamate different aspects of the religious traditions of the empire, regardless of their geographical location, in an attempt at finding a universal way to salvation, as stated in a famous passage by Porphyry that would become a paramount tenet in the formulation of the *prisca theologia*.[63]

The thread of the discourse may be summarized by remembering that in modern times the word esotericism and its cognate adjective esoteric is initially found in the work of a theologian and historian of early Christianity, Jacques Matter, who taught in Strasbourg and was a specialist in the school of Alexandria.[64] In his *Histoire critique du gnosticisme*, published in 1828, he linked Gnosticism and syncretism, stating that these syncretistic Christians filled the void of the doctrines of their Master by supposing the existence of esoteric doctrines together with the exoteric ones.[65] According to Matter, these secret creeds had originated in the encounter between the teachings of Christ and various 'oriental' doctrines,

[60] For the origin of the expression cf. Seng 19f.

[61] Cf. Filoramo, 215: "Neo-Platonic philosophers and Christian apologists participated in a general *doxa* composed of the (revealed) original source of wisdom, the typical manner in which Neo-Platonic philosophers reinterpreted this traditional source and the way this source was used in Christian apologetic literature as the basis of 'Christian philosophy'. This scheme, which the Christian apologists used to ground their antiquity, was taken up by the Humanists to recover the pagan tradition".

[62] Cf. especially Timotin and Agnosini in this volume. Cf. also Taormina and Molina.

[63] The implied reference is the famous passage (referred to by Aug., *De civitate dei* X 32) on the universal way to salvation predicated by Porphyry, on which cf. Clark; Simmons, "Porphyrian Universalism" and *Universal salvation* (with the review by Becker); Beatrice; Cerutti, "'La via' ..."; and Digeser. Cf. also Sfameni Gasparro in this volume.

[64] Matter (1791-1864), following his studies in Göttingen and Paris, obtained a chair in Strasbourg, where he became dean of the Theological Faculty. A prolific writer, he was also interested as a Lutheran pastor in questions of ethics and morality.

[65] This and the following quotations are derived from the discussion of Laurant, *L'ésotérisme* 19-23.

as well as those of Plato and Pythagoras, who drank at the springs of ancient 'theosophy'. On this occasion he referred to what Hippolytus reports about Basilides, namely that his disciples were compelled to five years of silence before being admitted to the sect and concluded that "ces epreuves et cet ésotérisme existaient d'ailleurs dans toute l'antiquité".[66] Six years later, in 1834, he dealt again with the subject (which undoubtedly was one of his favourites, for he would resign from his position as general inspector of libraries in 1846 in order to dedicate himself only to his research and to his theosophical circle in Strasbourg), adding at this stage the testimony of other anti-heretical treatises, in particular the passage in which Tertullian compares the Valentinian Gnostics to the initiates in the Eleusinian mysteries.[67] Notwithstanding the acknowledgement of some differences between initiation, as it was understood by philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato and, later on, Plotinus and Porphyry, he concluded that "ésotérisme et initiation étaient liés totalement" and that "l'ésotérisme des gnostiques est donc prouvé".[68] In conclusion, according to Matter and to other representatives of this trend, such as Jacques Étienne Marconis de Negre or Pierre Leroux, esotericism is a secret wisdom, transmitted only to initiates in secret societies, clearly different from the profane or trivial forms of knowledge and, above all, detached from the revolving vicissitudes of history. In the same years, mention can also be made of Antoine de Genoude, whose translation of Clement's *Stromateis* was acknowledged as containing "la clef d'un grand nombre d'hiéroglyphes et le sens caché du beaucoup de figures mysterieuses";[69] and of Eliphas Lévi's attempt at reviving occultism,

[66] Matter, *Histoire* 83.

[67] Matter, *De l'initiation*, with reference to Tert., Adv. Val. 1, 1. In this sense it is also worth hinting at Irenaeus' *mystici sacerdotes* (referred to the Marcosians in Adv. haer. I 23, 4). Quite interestingly Pasi, "The Problems ..." 204 notes that Hanegraaff's book lacks a thorough discussion of concepts such as that of initiation "and, possibly as a related aspect, ... little attention is also given to ancient mystery cults (such as Eleusis) as models and sources for esoteric narratives of origins, in spite of the importance they clearly have for many forms of Freemasonry and for esoteric organizations in general". This gap has now been filled by Bogdan. On initiation rituals in Classical and Middle-Eastern Antiquity cf. Bleeker and Bremmer.

[68] Matter, *De l'initiation* 12.

[69] Laurant, *L'ésotérisme* 23, with reference to Caillet 358. Laurant significantly adds that the modern edition of Alain Le Boulluec also discusses in detail the meaning of the term esotericism (II 217-290, when dealing with Strom. V 9, 59), on which cf. now Itter and, even earlier, Fortin. A general perspective is offered by Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*. Antoine Eugène Genoud, later to be Abbé de Genoude (1792-

which he thought possible by finding in the secret doctrines of the Chaldaeans, Hebrews and Egyptian the lost unity of science and religion. The use that Lévy and other figures of occultists and theosophers (mainly Madame Blavatsky), not to mention Freemasons, made of antiquity demonstrates the existence of a *fil rouge* linking the two worlds.[70]

These premises are therefore important in order to demonstrate that Western esotericism finds its roots already in Greco-Roman antiquity, yet this period is essential in the shaping of some features that would be incorporated later on. Not only are Faivre's characteristics (if this model is accepted) an integral part of many movements of late antiquity labelled as esoteric, but, when considering esotericism as rejected knowledge or as an image of the other, antiquity (and late antiquity in particular) can definitely testify to many movements considered alternative to public or institutionalized religious traditions. The theoretical conceptualization of marginality, which partly represents a sort of 'dark side', stems from different and, in some respects opposing, tendencies, namely its innovative character, sometimes resulting in new cultic forms or religious practices, or involving a reformation of traditional religion, often due to the influence of foreign rites (in particular those of the mysteries or the so-called Oriental religions, not to mention Judaism and Christianity). Quite often these movements emphasize some aspects of secrecy and a sort of esoteric character, which, however, is not exempt from trivial or superstitious practices that can surpass the boundary of what is licit, as in the case of magic. Moreover, the distinction between literary texts and cultural movements is not easily understandable, especially if we bear in mind that these *corpora*, often utilized as canonical scriptures or reference texts, show the intermingling of doctrinal elements, ways of life, and ritual elements (such is the case of the compresence of operative-practical and spiritual elements in alchemy or Hermetism).[71] It is also necessary to clarify the role played by different kinds of

1849), was mainly a journalist and politician (adopting a royalist and legitimist position in the events that followed the Congress of Vienna and the monarchy of July in France); his intimacy with Chateaubriand and other Catholic milieus is testified to by some books on early Christianity and by the nine volumes of the Greek Church Fathers in translation.

[70] For further information cf. Tommasi, "La preghiera delle Salamandre."

[71] Snyder's category of scriptural communities can be profitably employed. Coblentz Bautch draws attention on pseudepigraphy as a way to vehiculate esoteric contents. Seminal considerations towards the existence and structure of an organized Hermetic 'church' are put forward by Fowden 154-195. Festugière, *Hermétisme* 30 already

rituals, as well as the social composition of these groups, mystical conventicles, cultic associations, and philosophical schools, where the transmission of knowledge from master to disciple (παράδοσις) is sometimes presented as esoteric or, conversely, propagated to all the members of the community. This concept comes very close to the original meaning of the word or to the "claims of higher or perfect knowledge" advocated by von Stuckrad, who notes how such claims are communicated in a dialectics of secrecy and concealment, either in a search for self-empowerment, or by the intervention of divine or semi-divine figures or sages endowed with supernatural wisdom. Finally, it is possible (and to some extent indispensable) to distinguish between a sort of theological *koiné* agreed on by everyone and the peculiarities of each milieu.

A first step is represented by the establishing of a historical and social background to the different doctrines, their overlapping and intermingling. The reconstruction of the mentality of philosophical groups and religious circles, which were often perceived of as schools, is particularly important. A second step must take into account a typical *Weltanschauung* of late antiquity, namely the multi-layered structure of the universe attested to in different way by Gnostics, Hermetists, Neoplatonists and Chaldaeans, which had a concrete parallel in the bureaucratic structure of the Roman Empire and its increasing tendency to hierarchy. This investigation confirmed the old idea of Henry Corbin, namely that late antique Platonism was essentially meant to explicate the readying of humankind for a progressive ascension towards the divine, which, for its part, was far removed if not detached from this earthly world.[72] A deeper investigation of the interconnections of these trends within the socio-cultural terrain of the Roman Empire is needed, in particular how they were accepted or rejected by the official or predominant culture, whether Christian or Neoplatonic, in order to reconstruct the role they played. For example, it is well known that the *Chaldaean Oracles* were considered a Neoplatonic Bible and their *logia* were explained in a later phase of Neoplatonism, the one mostly characterized by mystical trends, together with Orphic poems.[73] At the same time, it is worth recording the ambiguous intertwining of Gnosticism and Platonism, which recent scholarship has been stressing more and more.[74] In a parallel way, the tormented re-

noted the coexistence of practice and theory in the Hermetic scriptures. Cf. also Van den Kerchove in this volume.

[72] Cf. Corbin.

[73] Cf. Seng, Thiel and Schelske in this volume.

[74] This aspect has been outlined by Longo, Soares Santoprete and Dubois in this volume.

lationship between Gnosticism and the Great Church in the second century was characterized by a strenuous and strong polemic, even though at the same time one can notice an osmotic process that influenced the progressive formulation of doctrinal language and theological elaboration.

This is meaningful for a better understanding of the dialectic between 'orthodoxy-orthopraxy' and 'heresy' and the formation of a scriptural canon: although the words immediately refer to a Christian context, such a tension is to be found not only in Christianity, where it seems better to speak of a plurality of Christianities at least for the first two centuries, but also in pagan philosophical schools or even in literary debates.[75] Likewise, as stated by Hanegraaff and earlier theorists with respect to the Christian traditions of 17th-18th century Europe, the cat-and-mouse game between repression and self-defence (with the attempt at legitimizing a position by having recourse to the exemplary past), becomes quite important from a historical perspective.

However, reading esoteric movements in mere polemical-oppositional terms would be misleading: once again, late antiquity can provide some interesting parallels. Recent studies have acknowledged how the essential linguistic tools of 'orthodox' theology was also shaped by borrowing terms and images used by dissident groups. If we consider Christianity as a touchstone and apply this method to other late antique marginal trends, it may lead to a better appreciation of such an exchange. Indeed, the idea of a struggle between different factions or parties with the eventual formation of an orthodox paradigm has been recently suggested also for paganism, for instance in the Platonic school, where many tendencies seem to cross over, from the orientalism of Numenius to the theurgical-mystical line, whereas Plotinus represents the normative aspect. Nonetheless, in contrast to the interpretation offered by Polymnia Athanassiadi, according to whom Neoplatonism itself experienced a struggle between orthodoxy and heresy,[76] it is possible to consider how these marginal doctrines are fundamental to understanding the developments of Platonism and its progressive tendency towards mysticism. If they are considered from a diachronic perspective, it will be noted that tendencies such as theurgy, which were initially marginalized, became more and

[75] Cf. Norelli, "Of Books"; "Construire l'opposition". Tanaseanu-Döbler in this volume, 358-360, offers a thorough albeit succinct discussion that makes evident the problems raised by the application of the terms to non-Christian issues. At the same time, Monaca stresses the reuse of pagan sources in heresiological literature.

[76] We refer to the controversial books by Athanassiadi, *La lutte* and *Vers la pensée unique* (together with the critical discussion of Morlet).

more prominent from Iamblichus onwards. Outlining the tension between mainstream and marginal groups (such as Gnostics, Hermetists, etc.), and discussing their reciprocal interaction appears much more challenging than reiterating the opposition between orthodoxy and heresy or the dialectical confrontation between 'rational' or 'irrational' trends, for the development of orthodoxy is a gradual process and cannot be separated from its marginal fringes. In this respect, 'orthodoxy' can be perceived as a fluid and continuous process that entails the construction of self-definition, all the more since, in any doctrinal conflict, it is not possible to know its outcome with any certitude, or which doctrine will ultimately prevail. It seems worthwhile to refer to the introductory considerations written by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, in his monograph on *Arius*, when he states that "modern scholarship has become increasingly aware of how the very vocabulary of orthodox theology is shaped by borrowing and reworking the terms and images of dissident groups ... To understand such process is to experience orthodoxy as something still future (to become 'coeval' with the debate, at some level). ... A picture of doctrinal history along these lines is perhaps more constructive than a reiteration of imagined absolute opposition ... There is no absolute *locus standi* above the struggle; there is ideally a continuing conversation that must be exploratory and innovative even when it is also polemical. Orthodoxy continues to be *made*".[77] Therefore, the formation of orthodoxy is to be read as the result of an often ambivalent process of definition, which implies a simultaneous consideration of the continuity of and change in (even instances of rupture among) the different movements, both from the perspective of the philosophical schools and from the tension between canonical or normative aspects and marginal ones, in order to ascertain the role this tension had in developing the various doctrines.[78]

[77] R. Williams 24f.

[78] The present writer is grateful to Giovanni Casadio for insightful comments and to Elizabeth MacDonald for revising the English of this paper.

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Anna Van den Kerchove

La mystique dans les écrits hermétiques

1 Introduction

Les écrits hermétiques appartiennent à ce que le Père Saffrey appelle la « quête passionnée de certitude supra-rationnelle, autrement dit révélée »[1] et relèvent d'une voie de salut, la « voie d'Hermès » ou « voie d'immortalité ».[2] Que ces écrits sont aussi une *traditio mystica*[3] est généralement admis. Cependant, cette opinion est le plus souvent posée comme un *a priori* qui n'est pas vraiment explicité,[4] et il est surtout question de mystique dans des pages traitant avant tout des liens entre écrits hermétiques et mystères ;[5] cela tient compte du rapport étymologique entre « mystique » et « mystère »,[6] mais non des différences entre

[1] Saffrey 45 = 33.

[2] NH VI p. 63, 11 ; cf. Mahé, « La voie d'immortalité ... » 347-375. Pour les abréviations des références anciennes données nous suivons les règles suivantes : CH = *Corpus Hermeticum*, suivi du numéro du traité en chiffre romain et du chapitre en chiffre arabe ; NH : codex de Nag Hammadi, suivi du numéro du codex en chiffre romain et du numéro (en chiffre arabe) de l'écrit au sein du codex ; SH : fragments de Stobée, suivi du numéro du fragment et du chapitre, tous les deux en chiffres arabes.

[3] Par exemple, Festugière, *La Révélation* II 35 ; Bull 399-426. Dans le recueil d'articles d'André-Jean Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, il n'est pas question de la mystique hermétique en tant que telle.

[4] Cf. entre autres Ménard CX ; Heinrici qui pensait qu'il aurait existé une mystique hermétique ; il inspira Windisch 186-240. Cf. aussi Haage 196s., où rien n'est dit sur ce qu'il en serait de la mystique dans les écrits hermétiques.

[5] Van Moorsel 128-135 et surtout 128 et 133. Sfameni Gasparro, « La gnosi ermetica ... » 43-62 ; Bull. Il faut aussi mentionner la position de Richard Reitzenstein qui parlait de « *Lesemysterium* » (Reitzenstein 51s.64.243-245), considérant que les écrits remplaçaient les pratiques rituelles et que leur lecture provoquait une illumination chez le lecteur. Il a été suivi par Tröger. Garth Fowden, qui rejette l'idée de « *Lesemysterium* », considère l'importance de la relation tout en affirmant la grande différence entre les *hermetica* et les mystères qui ont leur racine dans les pratiques cultuelles traditionnelles (Fowden 221).

[6] Voir ci-après.

les sens antiques et modernes de « mystique ». Seul, à notre connaissance, André-Jean Festugière livra des pages dédiées explicitement à la mystique dans les traités hermétiques, avec une distinction entre la mystique par extraversion et la mystique par introversion.[7]

Dans les pages qui suivent, nous souhaitons revenir sur cette question de la mystique dans les écrits hermétiques, en ayant à l'esprit l'appel à la prudence de Luc Brisson quant à l'emploi de la notion de « mystique » à propos d'écrits antiques.[8] Qu'entend-on par mystique dans les écrits hermétiques ? Comment s'exprime-t-elle ? Quels sont les liens avec les pratiques rituelles dont les écrits témoignent également ? Dans un premier temps, nous n'allons pas partir d'une définition moderne de mystique. Le choix est pourtant grand, mais avec des définitions nombreuses et variées,[9] « la mystique semble se perdre dans la plus grande indistinction ».[10] Nous allons plutôt analyser l'usage que font les auteurs du concept « mystique ». Puis, nous étudierons des passages hermétiques où il est question d'une expérience de rencontre avec le divin qui a pu être aujourd'hui qualifiée de « mystique » au sens moderne. Enfin, nous proposerons une synthèse au sujet de ces expériences.

2 Un enseignement « mystique »

2.1 Μυστικός dans CH XIV

Le terme μυστικός est uniquement utilisé par l'auteur de CH XIV, un écrit difficile à dater (II^e^-III^e^ siècles ?), en tout cas antérieur à Cyrille d'Alexandrie qui cite plusieurs extraits de CH XIV dans son *Contre Julien*.[11] Dans le préambule, l'auteur met en place un cadre fictionnel qui justifie la forme épistolaire du discours d'Hermès à Asclépios :

> Puisque mon fils, Tat, alors que tu étais absent, a voulu apprendre la nature de toutes les choses (τὴν τῶν ὅλων ἠθέλησε φύσιν), il ne m'a pas permis de remettre (cette instruction) à plus tard ; comme il est mon fils et un très jeune récemment parvenu à la connaissance des choses, il était nécessaire de parler longuement sur chacune (περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου ἠναγκάσθην πλείονα εἰπεῖν), afin

[7] Festugière, *La Révélation* IV 141-258.
[8] Brisson 61-72.
[9] Cf. à ce sujet les pages éclairantes de Laux 77-80.
[10] Laux 80.
[11] CH XIV 6s. et 8-10 dans *Contre Julien* II 42 PG 76, 597 d / 600 a ; 600 a-b.

> que l'étude soit facile à suivre (εὐπαρακολοῦθητος) pour lui ; mais pour toi, ayant choisi les chapitres les plus importants (τὰ κυριώτατα κεφάλαια) des choses dites, j'ai voulu t'envoyer un résumé (δι' ὀλίγων), en les interprétant d'une manière plus « mystique »[12] (μυστικώτερον αὐτὰ ἑρμηνεύσας), puisque tu es plus âgé et savant (ἐπιστήμονι) sur la nature.

L'auteur emploie le concept au comparatif neutre, μυστικώτερον, avec un sens adverbial, pour qualifier l'exégèse qui sera faite des points les plus importants. Apparenté à μύω, « clore la bouche, faire silence », et à μύστης, μυστικώτερον renvoie étymologiquement aux mystères grecs. L'auteur de CH XIV l'utilise pour évoquer les idées de secret de sens profond ; en effet, de même que les philosophes, ce qui l'intéresse « dans les rites de Mystères, c'est la double entente : un objet, un terme ou un récit désigne quelque chose de plus profond que ce qu'il paraît désigner au premier abord ».[13] L'exégèse ainsi proposée à Asclépios, qui se distingue de l'enseignement destiné à Tat – oral, détaillé et plus facile à comprendre –, permet d'accéder à ce sens profond ; elle n'a besoin ni d'un dialogue oral ni d'un raisonnement argumentatif et développé, mais elle est allégorique et s'appuie sur les connaissances antérieures qui permettront à Asclépios de décrypter seul le sens profond. Elle est réservée à Asclépios, qui est tenu au secret vis-à-vis du profane et du disciple moins avancé. Cette distinction au sein d'un même cercle entre un enseignement ésotérique réservé à un nombre restreint de disciples et un enseignement exotérique ouvert à un plus grand nombre se retrouve dans d'autres écrits hermétiques, comme SH 23,7 (Hermès se défend d'avoir tout dévoilé à Tat) ou *Asclépius* 1 (Hermès limite le nombre d'auditeurs à trois au vu du caractère très religieux de l'entretien) et est un trait commun à plusieurs groupes philosophiques et religieux, ce qu'Origène évoque bien dans son *Contre Celse* I 7. Toutefois, l'emploi du comparatif μυστικώτερον semble indiquer que l'enseignement pour Tat n'est pas dépourvu de tout caractère « mystique » et qu'il est lui aussi lié au secret (cette fois vis-à-vis du profane) et a un certain sens profond. Cela implique que pour cet auteur, l'enseignement d'Hermès est déjà « mystique » quel que soit le disciple (à la différence peut-être d'autres groupes contemporains) et que la distinction entre deux étapes est plutôt une question de degré, avec une exégèse μυστικώτερον, « plus

[12] Festugière : « d'une manière plus secrète » (Corpus Hermeticum II 222) ; Sfameni Gasparro : « in maniera più segreta » (*Soteriology* 46) ; Bull : « more mystical interpretation » (412) ; Salaman « the more hidden meanings » (89).
[13] Brisson 70.

mystique », qui succède à un enseignement à la fois un peu « mystique » et argumentatif.[14]

L'usage de « mystique » dans CH XIV rejoint ainsi ce que Luc Brisson dit à propos de Plotin et de Porphyre[15] et plusieurs acceptions que Daniel Mazilu a relevé chez les auteurs néoplatoniciens, en particulier l'idée que l'enseignement hermétique a pour objet le sacré.[16] Bien qu'il n'y ait pas d'autre occurrence de ce terme, la représentation de l'enseignement hermétique dont il témoigne nous semble valable pour la plupart des écrits hermétiques.

2.2 « Mystique », silence et secret

L'usage de μυστικώτερον est en effet en accord avec ce que l'on peut lire dans les autres écrits hermétiques. Les auteurs évoquent régulièrement le silence qu'il faut garder sur ce qui est dit, vu et éprouvé, et ils le font en employant κρυπτός, des termes indiquant le silence ou l'action de voiler et un lexique emprunté aux mystères grecs.

Ce lexique comporte uniquement vingt-huit occurrences,[17] mais cela dans un nombre réduit d'écrits. Comme le fait remarquer Christian

[14] Sur le plan strictement pédagogique, cette situation s'accorde avec les pratiques scolaires contemporaines qui tiennent compte des compétences particulières de chacun. Il était en effet recommandé de débuter par des *progymnasmata*, des exercices rhétoriques préliminaires, notamment par les *chreia* car c'était « court et facile à mémoriser » (Théon, *Progymnasmata* 64, 30s.), avant d'en venir ensuite à des exercices plus difficiles, en fonction des capacités de chaque étudiant. Cf. Cribiore 221-223.

[15] Brisson 61-65.

[16] Mazilu 95 et aussi 92.

[17] Dans notre décompte, nous n'avons pas tenu compte des deux occurrences de μύω dans CH X 4 et SH 26, 12, où le verbe a son sens étymologique de « fermer », « clore ». Bull en décomptait vingt-six, n'ayant pas tenu compte des deux occurrences du négatif ἀμύητος. Quant à van Moorsel 77s., il ne prend en compte que les occurrences du pluriel *mysteria* ; le singulier dénoterait pour lui une « almost exclusive biblical parentage », dans une note (77 n. 7) qui pourrait très certainement entrer dans la critique de Smith 74-76. Cela laisse quatre occurrences auxquels van Moorsel retranche celle d'Ascl. 37 (van Moorsel 78 n. 8). Quel que soit le décompte, le lexique emprunté aux mystères grecs est assez rare, ce qui a été diversement interprété dans le cadre de l'étude des rapports entre écrits hermétiques et les mystères grecs. D'un côté, van Moorsel 78 considère que cette rareté témoigne que l'hermétisme est un mystère : « low-frequent μυστήριον is most welcome, as so it becomes clear that a *pneumatic* mystery of the radical type is not (inductively) made up of a

Bull,[18] deux textes concentrent la majorité des occurrences :[19] SH 23 avec neuf occurrences (μυστήριον/α et μύειν) et le *Discours parfait* (six occurrences de *mysterium/a* dans l'*Asclepius* et quatre de ⲙⲩⲥⲧⲏⲣⲓⲟⲛ dans NH VI 8). Les différents termes qualifient le plus souvent l'enseignement ou une doctrine : en CH I 16 sur la génération des sept hommes par la Nature ; en CH XVI 2 pour toute la leçon qui suit (semble-t-il) ; en Ascl. 19 pour la hiérarchie divine ; en Ascl. 22 pour la reproduction ; en Ascl. 32 probablement pour le passage sur les différents intellects ; et en SH 25, 11 sur les divisions de l'espace. Quelques occurrences diffèrent : il s'agirait de rites (d'animation des statues)[20] en Ascl. 37 et plutôt des astres célestes en SH 23, 3.5.68.[21]

Ce champ lexical établit une analogie entre l'enseignement hermétique et une initiation mystérique. Étudiant CH XIII, Giulia Sfameni Gasparro avait relevé qu'il pouvait être possible d'appliquer au contenu de cet écrit des termes servant à décrire des cultes à mystères : τὰ λεγόμενα, τὰ δρώμενα[22] et τὰ δεικνύμενα, puisqu'il s'agit d'un *logos*, qui est accompagné d'une *praxis* (la *genesiourga*) et qui culmine notamment par l'affirmation du disciple qu'il a vu le Tout et lui-même.[23] Il est possible d'élargir cette analyse à plusieurs écrits hermétiques : les λεγόμενα correspondent aux leçons délivrées par le maître à un petit

maximum of jargon and *termini tecnici* [...], but (deductively) proceeds from a 'feeling beyond words'. » De l'autre, il y a la position de Garth Fowden qui relève la rareté en insistant sur les différences entre la voie d'Hermès et les mystères grecs (Fowden 148s.). Pour notre part, nous considérons que même si ce lexique est moins utilisé que d'autres termes tels que *noûs*, il n'en est pas moins significatif.

[18] Bull 400.

[19] Les autres occurrences se répartissent ainsi : trois occurrences : SH 25 (μύστις, μύστης, μυστήριον) ; deux occurrences : fragment divers 23 (= Cyrille, *Contre Julien* I 48 PG 76, 556 a-b) (μυστήριον et ἀμύητος) ; une occurrence : CH I (μυστήριον) ; CH V (ἀμύητος) ; CH XIV (μυστικώτερον) ; CH XVI (μυστήριον).

[20] Sur ces mystères en Ascl. 37, cf. notre interprétation dans Van den Kerchove, *La Voie d'Hermès* 210-214.

[21] Sur l'utilisation du terme *mysterium* dans le traité latin cf. Bertolini 1172-1177 et Bull.

[22] Notons la position de Gerard van Moorsel qui, tout en identifiant l'hermétisme à un mystère, considère qu'il n'y a pas de δρώμενα (van Moorsel 77) et, dans sa conclusion, il affirme : « it (hermetism) threw the δρώμενα overboard whilst *saving* the liturgy » (133), en lien avec l'idée d'une incompatibilité entre spiritualisation et pratiques rituelles.

[23] Sfameni Gasparro, « La gnosi ermetica ... » 55. Sur l'emploi de ces termes pour les cultes à mystères, cf. Calame 202s. (Je remercie Francesco Massa de m'avoir signalé cet article).

nombre de disciples sélectionnés, les δρώμενα aux pratiques qui ponctuent plusieurs leçons (prières, pratiques comme le baptême dans le cratère, et probablement des pratiques de purification) et les δεικνύμενα à ce que le maître donne à voir au cours des leçons (même si c'est souvent de manière noétique).[24] Le maître hermétique apparaît comme un mystagogue et le disciple un myste, même s'il n'y a aucune attestation de « mystagogue » et seulement quatre de « myste ».[25]

L'emploi de ces termes contribue – à côté d'autres éléments tels que la relation entre maître et disciples, les exercices spirituels, le recours à des références égyptiennes – à ritualiser l'enseignement et lui accorde un caractère « mystique ». En effet, de la même manière que μυστικώτερον, les termes empruntés aux cultes à mystères se rapportent à un enseignement ou une doctrine portant sur le divin et réservé(e) à un petit nombre, et ils impliquent un enseignement double, avec une partie destinée à tous les disciples et une autre seulement aux plus avancés. La voie d'Hermès présente donc une grande analogie avec les cultes à mystères, mais peut-on aller jusqu'à faire de la voie d'Hermès un culte à mystères ? En effet, rien n'indique quelque chose d'équivalent à l'organisation à l'un ou l'autre des cultes à mystères grecs.[26]

L'usage des termes relevé ci-dessus s'accorde avec celui que les philosophes font, mais tout en étant aussi, sur le plan de la structure interne des discours hermétiques, un procédé rhétorique pour attirer l'attention du disciple et du lecteur sur un point particulier de l'enseignement. Ainsi, comme chez Plotin, Porphyre et les néoplatoniciens ultérieurs, la notion de « mystique » ne renvoie pas à une expérience de rencontre immédiate avec le divin, mais plutôt à une certaine interprétation et à un certain enseignement qui permet d'accéder à un sens plus profond et qui porte sur le divin, quel qu'il soit, le tout dans une analogie avec les mystères grecs.

[24] Le verbe νοῶ, notamment en CH I, signifie parfois « voir noétiquement ».

[25] Deux occurrences du positif μύστης (SH 25, 1, 4 à propos d'Horus et d'Isis) et deux du négatif ἀμύητος (à propos de Tat en CH V 1 et un emploi plus général dans le fragment divers 23 = Cyrille, *Contre Julien* I 48 PG 76, 556 a).

[26] La question de la communauté, du type d'organisation se pose à nouveau. Un lien avec un sanctuaire est possible, comme l'indique la mention de l'*adytum* en Ascl. 41. Il faudrait reprendre la question des cercles hermétiques en les insérant dans la recherche déjà bien balisée des différents types d'organisation communautaires dans l'empire romain.