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Correspondences

Online Journal for the
Academic Study of Western Esotericism

Editors

Jimmy Elwing and Aren Roukema

4 (2016)

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Editorial: A Good Year for Correspondences

Aren Roukema

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It's unclear at the moment how history will look back on 2016, but it was an exciting year for *Correspondences*. Our long term efforts to solidify our fledging project gained traction in March, when we received almost 400 euros through the Sponsorship Program for Independent Scholarly Initiatives, a development grant offered by the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. This grant provides us with funding for three years of web hosting, as well as the financial resources needed to secure membership with professional open access databases, a move which will make our content more easily searchable and accessible.

Even without this affiliation, *Correspondences* has been making good progress in our efforts to establish a publication that can deliver important new research and widely distribute it via an open access (OA) publishing model. We recently dug around in the belly of the intrawebs and gathered statistics on the journal's performance since it's founding in 2012. Despite our publication's relative youth, our readership and citation statistics (as measured by Google Scholar) suggest that with a few more years of longevity we'll have similar citation rates to established print publications of a similar size and research scope. We believe that in addition to the quality of the work *Correspondences* has been fortunate to publish, this impact can be explained by the widespread distribution enabled by the OA model.

Our most significant step forward this year, however, was the appointment of Dr. Allan Johnson of the University of Surrey to our editorial team. Allan specializes in esoteric currents in modernist British literature. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and former Marjorie G. Wynne Fellow of British

Literature at Yale University. In addition to his work with *Correspondences*, Allan is taking exciting new approaches to the study of esotericism as director of the Magic, Language, and Society Network, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, in partnership with Treadwell's Bookstore in London. Allan has already improved the journal's digital infrastructure, switching the journal's management and publishing software to Open Journal Systems (OJS), and will be taking on other editorial roles in the future.

2016 also brought us the articles and reviews enfolded in this volume. As usual, these essays and analyses of recently published material reflect the enormous diversity of esoteric studies. Egil Aspren looks at the roots of the esoteric imagination in medieval kataphatic spirituality; Julian Strube places Eliphas Lévi's symbol of the Baphomet in the context of his political, religious and scientific views, and Boaz Huss provides a history of Zohar translations that will prove invaluable to researchers of the history of kabbalah. Reviews by Amy Hale, Keith Cantú, Peter Olsson, Dylan Burns, Christopher Plaisance and Cimminnee Holt round out an issue that, in its diversity, should appeal to all. We hope you enjoy it.

Esotericism and the Scholastic Imagination: The Origins of Esoteric Practice in Christian Kataphatic Spirituality*

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Abstract

Scholars agree that the imagination is central to esoteric practice. While the esoteric *vis imaginativa* is usually attributed to the influx of Neoplatonism in the Italian Renaissance, this article argues that many of its key properties were already in place in medieval scholasticism. Two aspects of the history of the imagination are discussed. First, it is argued that esoteric practice is rooted in a broader kataphatic trend within Christian spirituality that explodes in the popular devotion literature of the later Middle Ages. By looking at the role of Bonaventure’s “cognitive theology” in the popularization of gospel meditations and kataphatic devotional prayer, it is argued that there is a direct link between the scholastic reconsideration of the imaginative faculty and the development of esoteric practices inspired by Christian devotional literature. Secondly, it is argued that the Aristotelian inner sense tradition of the scholastics left a lasting impression on later esoteric conceptualizations of the imaginative faculty. Examples suggesting evidence for both these two claims are discussed. The article proposes to view esoteric practices as an integral part of a broader kataphatic stream in European religious history, separated out by a set of disjunctive strategies rooted in the policing of “orthopraxy” by ecclesiastical authorities.

Keywords

Imagination; kataphatic practice; scholasticism; the inner senses; illumination; heteropraxy

* I wish to thank two anonymous peer reviewers for their immensely helpful comments and corrections, which have improved the quality of this article. For all remaining blunders and confusions in the text: *mea culpa*.

1. Introduction: Contextualizing Esoteric Practice

Recent scholarship in the field of esotericism has sought to demonstrate that the currents we now class as “esoteric” have, historically, been integral parts of the religious, philosophical, and scientific cultures of Europe.¹ This revisionist work has primarily focused on ideas and doctrinal systems, sometimes in combination with the institutional affiliations and social standing that “learned men” writing on esoteric topics enjoyed in their own lifetimes.² What has generally been lacking is a focus on practice.³ In this article I aim to show how esoteric practices can shed additional light on how esotericism has come to be differentiated from categories such as “religion” or “Christianity”. My main focus shall, however, be on the underlying continuities between esoteric and mainstream practices that tend to get hidden from view by these disjunctions.

¹ See especially Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity,” *Aries* 1, no. 1 (2001): 5–37; Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, “Esoterik und Christentum vor 1800: Prolegomena zu einer Bestimmung ihrer Differenz,” *Aries* 3, no. 2 (2003): 127–65; Kocku von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 34 (2005): 78–97; von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

² In addition to the programmatic works mentioned in footnote 1, numerous empirical and theoretical studies of this kind focusing on esotericism and the Enlightenment are found in the two volumes Neugebauer-Wölk, with Andre Rudolph (eds.), *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Rezeption – Integration – Konfrontation* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2008); Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth, and Markus Meumann (eds.), *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne* (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2013). See also Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2014); Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).

³ This appears to be an overall hiatus in esotericism scholarship, especially in work focusing on the early modern period. Exceptions are mainly found in some of the studies of modern initiatory and magical groups, notably Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). On the neglect of practice, see also Amy Hale, “Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs. Esoteric Studies,” *The Pomegranate* 15, no. 1–2 (2013): 151–63. The prominent inclusion of “practice” in Hanegraaff’s recent introduction to the field is a promising sign that this neglect is about to be remedied. See Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 102–18.

In the course of the article I will develop and defend two hypotheses: (1) that an important context for esoteric practices is found in the popular affective piety movement of the later Middle Ages, grounded in theological developments that emphasized the power of the imagination; and (2) that the fusion of an Aristotelian psychological tradition with a Neoplatonic epistemology which played out in high scholasticism prefigures the understanding of “imagination” and associated practices in later esoteric sources. While sections 2 to 4 below establish the necessary historical and conceptual background, I will assess both hypotheses in detail in section 5.

I define “practice” broadly, as any activity that is performed regularly and in a patterned way.⁴ “Esoteric” practices – by which I simply mean “practices that have later been labelled ‘esoteric’”⁵ – are typically concerned with a search for higher knowledge, or gnosis, and in so doing they tend to emphasize the use of the imagination. Based on this commonplace observation, I argue that esoteric practices typically make use of kataphatic, or imagery-based techniques, as opposed to apophatic techniques, which repress imagery. While the connection between esotericism and imagination is old hat,⁶ esotericism scholars have typically invoked imagination in order to set “esotericism” aside as something distinctive and different from other, presumably “unimaginative” cultural trends. For example, Faivre’s influential model presents the esoteric “form of thought” as the “radical counterpart of Enlightenment ideology” – where “imagination/mediation” stands in contrast to “monism/materialism”.⁷

⁴ My understanding of practice is in the tradition of Bourdieu, but drawing more specifically on the notion of “patterned practices” developed from that foundation in Anders Roepstorff, J. Niewöhner, and S. Beck, “Enculturing brains through patterned practices,” *Neural Networks*, 23, no. 8–9 (2010). Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁵ To avoid unnecessarily encumbering the language, and at the peril of obscuring the thoroughly constructionist assumptions that are implied throughout, I nevertheless take the liberty to use “esoteric practices” as a short-hand phrase.

⁶ E.g., as perhaps the most central characteristic in Antoine Faivre’s seminal definition of esotericism as a “form of thought.” See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 12-13; see also Faivre, “*Vis imaginativa*. A Study of Some Aspects of the Imagination and Its Mythical Foundations,” in *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). Cf. the substantial entry on the subject by Marieke van den Doel and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Imagination,” *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

⁷ As recently pointed out by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3 (2015): 80.

Rather than assuming this dichotomy, my argument is quite the opposite. The “esoteric” use of imagery-based techniques is part of a much broader orientation toward kataphatic spirituality, and individual practices should therefore be viewed as leaves on a major branch of European intellectual and religious history. In particular, I will argue that esotericism is aligned with a key trend in late-medieval theories of cognition, and with the devotional practices that it inspired among monastic orders and the laity alike.⁸

Connecting esoteric kataphatic practice with the conceptual history of the imagination also leads to other insights that break somewhat with the standard narrative. While the received view is that esotericism’s emphasis on the imagination is linked with the Neoplatonism and Hermeticism of the Renaissance humanists, the story that I will tell is one in which esotericism owes a great deal more to medieval high scholasticism. This, I shall argue, has three discernible consequences for the way we characterize the history of esotericism: it switches our focus of interest from Platonism to Aristotelianism; it extends the historical scope backwards to the Middle Ages, and especially to monasticism, scholasticism, and the emergence of popular piety based on scholastic theories of the imagination; and it emphasizes the need to consider the Islamicate contexts of core ideas.

2. The Kataphatic–Apophatic Distinction: Its Relation to “Esoteric Practice” and the Attainment of “Gnosis”

The distinction between kataphatic (*kataphasis*, “affirmation”) and apophatic (from *apophēmi*, “to deny”) has a long history in Christian theology. Most often it is used to distinguish the two opposing theological strategies of *via negativa* (apophatic) and *via positiva* (kataphatic). In this sense, the distinction can at least

⁸ For medieval cognitive theories see especially Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Pasnau, however, admits to a selective reading that focuses only on what he (a philosopher) considers “the most impressive and coherent statement” of the period’s cognitive theories, along with “the most interesting and innovative challenge to that theory” (Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, vii), and as a result he does not have much to say about the place of the imaginative faculty. On that topic, see Deborah Black, “Imagination and Estimation: Arabic Paradigms and Western Transformations,” *Topoi* 19, no. 1 (2000): 59–75. On the impact of these novel theories of imagination on contemplative and devotional practice, see especially Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2011).

be traced back to Pseudo-Dionysius (largely following Proclus).⁹ However, the pair has also had a systematic application in the study of “mysticism”, where they refer to two separate experiential approaches that, to some extent, mirror the theological distinction.¹⁰ “Apophatic” mysticism refers to a comprehension without words, beyond sensation and imagery, logic and reason – usually connected to claims of “transcendent” and “ineffable” knowledge. By contrast, the kataphatic mystic attains positive, graspable visions of the divine; seeing the face of God, walking in heavenly palaces, or receiving divine knowledge from conversations with the angels or the saints are examples of kataphatic experience in this sense.

Both the theological and the mystical understanding of these terms tend to focus on religious elites and virtuosi, but this bias is not inherent in or necessitated by the concepts themselves. More recently, the kataphatic/apophatic distinction has been generalized in order to pick out a basic difference in contemplative techniques, whether in meditation, prayer, or devotion.¹¹ As such, the two terms cover distinct types of practice that imply differences in how people apply their minds and bodies. Kataphatic practice works actively with mental and physical imagery, words, music, and emotion, engaging the sensorium in order to inspire a touch of divinity. Apophatic practice, in contrast, turns away from the senses and the outside world, seeking to empty the mind of content and obliterate the self in pursuit of a divinity beyond attributes. Rendered in these general terms, the kataphatic-apophatic distinction can serve as a *tertium comparationis* for religious practices the world over.¹² We find both types exemplified among mainstream and establishment institutions in the Christian west, although there is a clear preference for the kataphatic type. Monastic hesychasm, medieval “quietism”, and the contemporary “Centering Prayer” movement¹³ are examples of Christian

⁹ See Andrew Louth, “Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, edited by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 140.

¹⁰ E.g. Egan, “Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticisms.”

¹¹ See e.g. Tanya M. Luhrmann and Rachel Morgain, “Prayer as Inner Sense Cultivation: An Attentional Learning Theory of Spiritual Experience,” *Ethos* 40, no. 4 (2012); Luhrmann, Howard Nusbaum, and Ronald Thisted, “‘Lord, Teach Us to Pray’: Prayer Practice Affects Cognitive Processing,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 13 (2013).

¹² In a separate paper, I develop a theoretical framework for kataphatic practice that grounds it thoroughly in biological and cognitive processes that are shared across the species. See Egil Asprem, “Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice,” *Aries* 17, no. 1 (forthcoming).

¹³ The Centering Prayer movement was started by a group of American Cistercians in the

practices tending in the apophatic direction, while gospel meditations, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, and contemporary Charismatic prayer practices are examples of the kataphatic trend.¹⁴ It is notable that church authorities, especially the Roman Catholic, have tended to view the apophatic type as more problematic than the kataphatic one, as illustrated for example by the condemnation of Miguel de Molinos’s quietism as a heresy in 1687.¹⁵ This picture is, of course, complicated by the splintering and pluralization of religious authority that followed from the Reformation – with some Protestant new religious movements, like the Quakers, even building their orthopraxy on broadly apophatic foundations. With this in mind, the kataphatic-apophatic distinction can even be viewed as a practical and experiential aspect of the wider problem of mediation that has structured so much of the Catholic/Protestant polemic. In fact, we might hypothesize that while apophatic practice has been problematic from the perspective of Catholic authorities, kataphatic practices tend to become more problematic among Protestant ones.

However this may be, my present claim is that key practices that we now associate with Western esotericism have historically been related to the kataphatic trend that has been dominant in Catholic spirituality especially. Practices such as the medieval *ars notoria* and related operations focused on conversation with angels and attainment of divine knowledge,¹⁶ the Renaissance animation of statues,¹⁷ the “enthusiasm” of Christian theosophy,¹⁸ or the “clairvoyant” reading of the “Akashic records” in modern occultism¹⁹ all stand in continuum with mainstream Christian practices focused on developing the “inner senses”.²⁰

1970s, prompted by the massive interest in, and increasing supply of, Buddhist contemplative traditions. It has since spread rapidly in Christian communities across denominations. For an insider account, see Pennington, *Centering Prayer*.

¹⁴ See Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*.

¹⁵ See Innocent XI, “Condemning the Errors of Miguel de Molinos [Coelestis Pastor],” issued November 20, 1687, *Papal Encyclicals Online*, url: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Innoc11/i11coel.htm> (accessed April 17, 2016).

¹⁶ See e.g. Claire Fanger (ed.), *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ See Hanegraaff, “Sympathy or the Devil: Renaissance Magic and the Ambivalence of Idols,” *Esoterica* 2 (2000).

¹⁸ See e.g. Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom’s Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), 415–53.

²⁰ See discussions of the Christian preoccupation with “sensing” and “perceiving” the divine

From theurgy to past-life regression, accessing higher knowledge through internal mental imagery is everywhere in esoteric experiential practices.²¹

The claim that the imagination is central to esotericism is certainly not new; most scholarly definitions recognize it.²² Antoine Faivre has even suggested that the use of imagination is what demarcates “esotericism” from “mysticism”:

we could say that the mystic – in the strictly classical sense – aspires to the more or less complete suppression of images and intermediaries because for him they become obstacles to the union with God. While the esoterist appears to take more interest in the intermediaries revealed to his inner eye through the power of his creative imagination than to extend himself essentially toward the union with the divine. He prefers to sojourn on Jacob’s ladder where angels (and doubtless other entities as well) climb up and down, rather than to climb to the top and beyond.²³

I suggest that Faivre’s important distinction between an orientation towards imagery and intermediaries on the one hand, and radical transcendence on the other, is more appropriately expressed by the kataphatic–apophatic distinction.²⁴ This allows us to say that the currents we tend to class as esoteric display an *orientation* towards the kataphatic stream, while not denying that apophatic elements are also found.

The more nuanced picture of kataphatic and apophatic tendencies is handy when we consider the problem of “gnosis”. Virtually all scholars of esotericism emphasize that practices focus on the attainment of some special knowledge, and “gnosis” is the most common short-hand for this core aspect.²⁵ However, it is not always clear how the notion of gnosis maps on to the kataphatic, imagination-based character of esoteric practice. The

compiled in the recent volume by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²¹ For practices of the imagination as a *longue durée* of Western ritual magic, see Christopher A. Plaisance, “Magic Made Modern? Re-evaluating the Novelty of the Golden Dawn’s Magic,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 2 (2014): 165–74.

²² Most notably in Faivre’s influential definition, and in definitions relying on Henry Corbin’s notion of *mundus imaginalis*; but we also find it as an element in von Stuckrad’s discursive definition (in the guise of “mediation”). For the latter, see von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 34 (2005).

²³ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 12.

²⁴ For a critique of attempts to distinguish “mysticism” from “esotericism” in terms like these, see von Stuckrad, “Mysticism, Gnosticism, and Esotericism as Entangled Discourses,” 313–15.

²⁵ See Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 168–74.

most influential attempt to define gnosis as a technical category does so in *apophatic* terms. Hanegraaff uses the two dimensions of communicability and verifiability (or: language and the senses) to differentiate “gnosis”, “reason”, and “faith” as three separate approaches to knowledge. Set up in these terms, gnosis comes out as characteristically apophatic: the claim is of an unmediated, direct, ineffable knowledge of higher realities, which goes beyond sensation, reason, and discursive language.²⁶ By contrast, both “reason” and “faith” refer to knowledge claims that have a positive, discursively communicable and intelligible content – with “reason” additionally seeking to ground this content in sense data and logical argument. Somewhat counterintuitively, then, kataphatic practices appear closer to a “rational” than a “gnostic” or “faith-based” strategy: the idea is that the practitioner can follow certain specified techniques in order to evoke concrete and specific imagery in the mind (or even in the external perceptual field). Moreover, such practices will usually deploy a rigorous system of *discernment* in order to “test” the content and determine that it is good.²⁷ The road to esoteric knowledge through kataphatic visions typically involves language, imagery, and a form of empirical testing – albeit of “internal” rather than “external” sensations – through comparison of what has been seen, heard, or felt with official criteria or examples of what ought to be experienced under these circumstances.

Again, this is not to say that esoteric spokespersons never promise or report moments of pure apophatic insight. However, when they are present, apophatic elements of the “gnostic” type (*sensu* Hanegraaff) are typically related to the *goal of attainment* rather than the *path of practice*. I hold that we can view “esoteric practices” as what Ann Taves calls “composite ascriptions”, where special actions are tied to special goals (ACTION → GOAL).²⁸ On this view, my focus in the present article is on actions rather than goals: Even if the goal

²⁶ E.g. Hanegraaff, “Reason, Faith, and Gnosis: Potentials and Problematics of a Typological Construct,” in Peter Meusburger, Michael Welker, Edgar Wunder (eds.), *Clashes of Knowledge: Orthodoxies and Heterodoxies in Science and Religion* (Klaus Tschira Stiftung / Springer, 2008), 133–44.

²⁷ Thus, the key esoteric strategy has been characterized as a form of “extended” or “unbounded” reason. See the extensive discussion in Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 431–41.

²⁸ Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 46–48. Please note that this apparently simple concept presupposes a whole context of attribution theory, which studies how people attribute meanings, significance, agency, and causal power to things and events. *Composite ascriptions* combine any number of *simple ascriptions* (things/events deemed significant) into chains of goal-directed actions (practices). Thus, “special techniques” are used to achieve “special goals.”

may in some cases be expressed in apophatic terms, we see a preference for image-oriented *techniques* in order to achieve the goals.

We find examples of this composite structure across the history of esoteric practice. For example, in the theurgic context of Renaissance Neoplatonism (Ficino) and Hermeticism (Lazzarelli), kataphatic, imagery-based techniques precede the promised apophatic “revelatory event”.²⁹ The same is true in modern occultism, where both magically and theosophically oriented practices emphasize development of imagery as the path of practice, while holding up some ineffable experience of transcendent insight as the ultimate goal.³⁰ Complicating the picture, however, there are also examples of apophatic *practices* being mixed with the kataphatic ones. For example, Cornelius Agrippa spends most of the third book of *De occulta philosophia* talking about ritual practices that rely heavily on the support of sensory stimuli, symbolic mediation, and sensory engagement with spirits, yet he also includes (in chapter 55) an entry on the final “ascent of the mind” to “pure intellect” via abstinence, fasting, chastity, solitude, and tranquillity. Nevertheless, even in this case the practitioner would be expected to have already practiced kataphatic techniques before setting out on the apophatic journey to pure intellect. What is more, this progression would make perfect sense from the background of medieval theories of the imagination and mental imagery.

3. The Imaginative Faculty: Scholastic Faculty Psychology and the Aristotelian Renaissance

What we today call the imagination is one thing – how practitioners might have conceived of mental imagery is quite another.³¹ Previous scholarship on

²⁹ On this, see the rich and suggestive analysis in Hanegraaff, “Sympathy or the Devil.”

³⁰ See for example the comparison of Rudolf Steiner’s “Dweller on the Threshold” experience and Aleister Crowley’s “Holy Guardian Angel” experience in Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 531–33.

³¹ To make matters even more complicated, there is no single and unambiguous definition of imagination in contemporary psychology or cognitive science. Here, I will assume that we are talking about the phenomenon of mental imagery, which has a big body of research connected to it – including studies on the cultivation of mental imagery, individual differences in reported imagery vividness, and various factors that influence it. I address this literature and its importance for understanding esoteric practices from a cognitive angle in Asprem, “Explaining the Esoteric Imagination.” For the concept of mental imagery cultivation, see Richard Noll, “Mental Imagery Cultivation as a Cultural Phenomenon: The Role of Visions in Shamanism,” *Current Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (1985). For an overview of psychological and neurocognitive research on mental imagery as a separate type of mental representations, see

esotericism and “the imagination” has typically not made it sufficiently clear whether “imagination” is a part of actors’ categories for explaining their own actions and experiences (that is, employed as an *emic* term), or whether it is used as a scholarly (etic) construct for the sake of analyzing the sources. In other words, it often remains unclear whether these analyses are drawing on contemporary theories of the imagination in order to shed light on historical phenomena, or whether they are engaged in excavating various historical meanings, theories, and practices that the actors themselves have attributed to “imagination”. One would be a form of cognitive historiography, the other a genealogy of the imagination. Both approaches can be valuable, but they are separate projects that must be distinguished carefully.

By and large, historians of esotericism appear to have started from contemporary understandings of the imagination, interpreting any practice that shows evidence of mental imagery as an exercise of “imagination”. Although it is usually not clear which psychological theory of imagination underpins these analyses, the frequent reference to terms such as “creative” and “active imagination” – terms associated with the heritage of Romanticism and even more specifically with the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung – justifies the suspicion that esotericism scholars are working from a vaguely Jungian conception, forged in the countercultural fervour of the Eranos meetings and imported into the study of esotericism by Faivre, via Henry Corbin.³² Essentially, it is the imagination of the romantics that is projected backwards in time: a conception of free and creative mental imagery as a contrast with, and escape from, the cold, rational, and scientific intellect or reason.³³

This, however, is a thoroughly modern contrast that is quite alien to key esoteric sources. With the failure to make sufficiently clear that the concept of “imagination” is not so much “discovered” in the sources as derived from the scholar’s own vocabulary, we may also have missed out on the emic cognitive theories that underpinned these practices. This section is a modest attempt at

Stephen M. Kosslyn, William L. Thompson, and Giorgio Ganis, *The Case for Mental Imagery* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). A much more detailed account of the relevant literature can be found in my separate paper cited above.

³² On the Eranos meetings, see especially Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013); on the influence of Eranos on an earlier generation of the study of esotericism, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277–314.

³³ For a great analysis of the romantic bias of Faivre’s notion in particular, see Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” 77–80. For a historical overview of the development of the romantic imagination from Enlightenment forbears, see James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

mapping some of this neglected territory.

My claim is that intellectual developments of the later Middle Ages left a permanent mark on esoteric conceptions of mental imagery.³⁴ This period saw an explosive interest in sophisticated theories of cognition, which would eventually influence devotional practice and piety on a broad scale.³⁵ Over the course of about a century (c. 1250 to 1350), scholastics like Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Henry of Ghent, Peter John Olivi, and William Ockham discussed the architecture of the human mind in great detail, developing an elaborate discourse on the philosophy of mind and mental function. There were many facets to these debates, and scholars were divided on a number of different grounds.³⁶ However, one of the issues at stake concerned the nature and function of mental imagery: where does it come from, how is it related to the faculty of “imagination”, and how does that faculty relate to the acquisition of knowledge (*scientia*) and understanding (*sapientia*)?

The early thirteenth century saw the importation from the Islamic world of the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, which included a rich commentary tradition in Arabic.³⁷ This literature, and especially the commentaries of Avicenna and Averroes, sparked a burst of scholarly creativity. For our purposes, the commentaries to *De anima* – itself previously unavailable in Latin – are of particular interest.³⁸ The Persian scholar Avicenna (980–1037), writing already in the eleventh century, is the foremost authority, backing up his elaborations on *De anima* and its Greek commentary tradition with a sophisticated knowledge of the anatomy of the human brain, which matched that of Galen and would go unrivalled until the days of Vesalius.³⁹ Avicenna’s works, together with those of Averroes (1126–1198), who had considerable differences with Avicenna that Latin scholars did not always identify, laid the foundation of a complex view of the faculties or “inner senses” that would resonate throughout medieval Europe.

³⁴ Please note that I distinguish between “mental imagery” and “imagination.” This is because, as we shall see, “mental imagery” is not always ascribed solely to imagination in these sources, and imagination is not solely about the formation of mental imagery.

³⁵ See especially Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*.

³⁶ A great overview with references to the major literature is available in Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁷ See Deborah L. Black, “Imagination and Estimation: Arabic Paradigms and Western Transformations,” *Topoi* 19, no. 1 (2000): 59–75.

³⁸ For a close reading of the reception of *De anima* among Latin authors, see now Sander de Boer, *The Science of the Soul: The Commentary Tradition on Aristotle’s De Anima, c. 1260–1360* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013).

³⁹ Christopher D. Green, “Where Did the Ventricular Localization of Mental Faculties Come From?” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2003): 131–42.

3.1 A brief overview of the inner senses: Avicenna

The basic idea of cognition following Aristotle is one in which information about the world imprints itself on the five external senses, and passes from there into a number of inner senses or faculties that are specialized in extracting further information from this stream.⁴⁰ In *De anima*, the “common sense” combines the separate sense modalities into one coherent picture. The medieval discussion of the inner senses emerged from attempts to elaborate on Aristotle’s “common sense”, “memory”, and especially his murky comments on “imagination”. Avicenna’s is a particularly influential and lucid attempt to do this, which set the stage for much of the later discussion both in the Muslim and the Christian world. Avicenna operates with five internal senses, to which are added a “cogitative faculty” that is dependent on the divinely endowed “intellect”.⁴¹ Below is a list of the faculties and their functions according to Avicenna:⁴²

| Faculty | Function |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Common sense | Receives sensible forms from the five external senses |
| Formative/retentive imagination | Retains the forms in images |
| Estimative faculty | Receives/makes judgments about intentions (of externally sensed objects) |
| Memorative faculty | Stores images and intentions |
| Compositive imagination | Composes and divides forms and intentions |
| Cogitative faculty | The compositive imagination under the voluntary control of the intellect – i.e., controlled compositive imagining. |

⁴⁰ For a classic, although somewhat dated, treatment of the inner sense tradition following Aristotle, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, “The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Philosophical Texts,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 28, no. 2 (1935).

⁴¹ As Black explains, Avicenna appears to say that the compositive imagination can be controlled either by estimation or by reason, and that this gives rise to two separate “aspects.” Thus, he is able to multiply the number of cognitive functions while restricting the number of inner senses to five. See Black, “Imagination and Estimation,” 60.

⁴² Avicenna’s psychological theory is developed in two different works, *Al-Shifa* (“Healing”) and *Al-Najab* (“Deliverance”). The parts of these works that deal with psychology are available in English translation in Fazlur Rahman, *Avicenna’s “De anima,” Being the Psychological Part of Kirab al-Shifa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), and idem, *Avicenna’s Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

What is notable here is that Avicenna operates with two distinct imaginative faculties: the “formative/retentive” and the “compositive”. The formative/retentive imagination accounts for our ability to retain a mental picture (image) of the forms that are received from the external senses (and combined by the *sensus communis*). These formal images are passed on to the “estimative” faculty, which is a specialized sense for detecting the *intentions* that go together with perceptible objects but are not themselves directly available to the external senses. While Avicenna is ambiguous about what counts as an intention, the examples he uses are typically about the affective states and motivations of animals, such as when a sheep perceives “hostility” in a wolf.⁴³ Both images and intentions are stored in the memorative faculty. The compositive imagination, then, is the ability to perform operations on both images and intentions, dividing them up into components, combining them with each other to form novel ones, attaching and replacing intentions to images, and so forth. Finally, this compositive form of imagination is crucial to the *cogitative* faculty, that is to “thinking” or “cognition” in the strict sense. Cogitation happens when the compositive imagination is set under the disciplined and voluntary control of the intellect.⁴⁴ This allows Avicenna to distinguish between disciplined thinking (where reason uses imagination as a tool) and the random, purposeless associations of the compositive imagination characteristic of dreams.

At this point we must consider another important distinction that Avicenna lifted from Aristotle and gave a platonizing interpretation: that between the active and the passive (or receptive) intellect. Aristotle needed a distinction of this kind because his metaphysics said that anything potential can only be brought into actuality by something already actual. Thus, since human intellection is a matter of a *capacity* for acquiring knowledge (rather than the Platonic view of “recollecting” forms already present in the mind), this potential capacity needs an actualizing agent.⁴⁵ The active or agent intellect, then, is an exact parallel to the prime mover in Aristotle’s cosmology.⁴⁶

Aristotle’s somewhat sketchy treatment of this distinction has, however,

⁴³ See Black, “Imagination and Estimation,” 60.

⁴⁴ This separation between a passive and an active form of imagination appears to have been prefigured among some of the Neoplatonist interpreters of Aristotle that Avicenna also had access to. See for example the discussion of Stephanus of Alexandria in Blumenthal, “Neoplatonic Interpretations of Aristotle on *Phantasia*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 31, no. 2 (1977), 254–56.

⁴⁵ While the distinction is made by Aristotle in *De Anima* 3.5, one should note that the terminology of active and passive intellect is introduced by his interpreters. On this see Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 42–43.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Haldane, “Aquinas and the Active Intellect,” 203.

occasioned a diversity of interpretations. In apparent conflict with the general flavour of his doctrine on the soul, it looks as if the active intellect is a unitary and universal entity that is, moreover, separate from all the passive intellects instantiated in each individual mind. This ambiguity was ripe for platonizing interpretations – a feature that the Neoplatonist commentators on Aristotle exploited fully.⁴⁷ This commentary tradition influenced Avicenna’s views as well, and through him and Averroes it entered the Latin west, where it has since proved rather contentious.

According to Avicenna, the active intellect is associated with Allah, separated from the individual passive intellects. It contains all forms, and transmits them to the receptive intellects, setting them in motion. These forms are then “activated” when the senses provide the appropriate particulars for the intellect to consider. Thus, when an image formed from external impressions is comprehended, it is “actualized” in the potential intellect by virtue of the illumination of the divine, active intellect.⁴⁸ This brings us to an important point about the power of the (compositive) imagination: In the epistemology of Avicenna, the imagination is a powerful faculty that is central to understanding; however, it only attains this power when it is subservient to the intellect that emanates from the divine.

3.2 Entering the Latin world

As Deborah Black notes, “it is impossible to isolate any universal features that are common to all medieval exponents of the philosophical doctrine of internal senses”.⁴⁹ Averroes, who would be viewed in the Latin world as the greatest of the commentators on Aristotle, differed markedly from Avicenna, replacing estimation with cogitation and collapsing the two distinct senses of imagination into one.⁵⁰ Among the scholastics, Albert the Great reinserted estimation and kept the distinction between a lower retentive imagination (*imaginatio*) and a higher compositive one (*phantasia*), while Thomas Aquinas followed Averroes in allowing a single imaginative faculty and held that animals have mere estimation where humans have cogitation.⁵¹ In addition, there are

⁴⁷ See e.g. Blumenthal, “Neoplatonic Interpretations of Aristotle on *Phantasia*.”

⁴⁸ Avicenna explicitly uses the analogy of light with the active intellect, a metaphor that was widespread among platonizing readings of Aristotle. See e.g. Frederic M. Schroeder, “Light and the Active Intellect in Alexander and Plotinus,” *Hermes* 112, no. 2 (1984): 239–48.

⁴⁹ Black, “Imagination and Estimation,” 68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 62–63. For other Latin commentaries, see de Boer, *The Science of the Soul* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013).

⁵¹ Black, “Imagination and Estimation,” 63–68.

differences in the views and functions of memory, not to mention a huge and theologically charged dispute about the nature of the active intellect.⁵² Aquinas departed from Avicenna in viewing the active intellect as “a power of deriving intelligible forms from experience as presented by *phantasms*”.⁵³ It is *not* a universal storehouse of forms, separate from each individual intellect, but the power that lets us extract the general from the particular – or, more technically, the “intelligible species” from the sensed object.

The question of how to understand the active intellect, and how it should be related to imagination, is crucial to our present task because it concerns the epistemic status of mental imagery. In general, the scholastics see the function of intellect as that which is able to extract the “intelligible species” of the images (or “phantasms”) provided by the imagination from the senses and bring it into understanding in the potential intellect.⁵⁴ In other words, the scholastics replace the more straight-forwardly Platonic interpretation of Avicenna, in which the species (or forms) are *supplied* by the active intellect, with a *hylomorphic* view where the forms (or species) are out there in the concrete objects and are “discovered” by the inner senses under the guidance of the intellect (compare fig. 1 and fig. 2). Thus, the scholastics avoid the Platonic problem of why individuals do not always understand all things, but are left to cope with the problem of explaining how the mind comes to uncover the forms hidden in the world through a series of mental operations that culminate with understanding in the potential intellect.

This difference in orientation has wide ramifications for the power of the imagination and the other inner senses, for it means that they are already involved with uncovering forms originally put in nature by God, rather than merely receiving signals about matter that the intellect then orders by supplying divine forms. This change starts with Albert, who draws on Averroes, and continues in his student Aquinas, whose *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* (1270) showed full awareness of the potentially heretical implications of postulating a separate agent intellect shared by all humans. In the faculty psychology that

⁵² See e.g. Haldane, “Aquinas and the Active Intellect,” 205-210; cf. Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, 12-13. The dispute about the agent intellect was in fact so theologically sensitive that it inspired several condemnations and prohibitions against being discussed. See e.g. John Wippel, “The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7, no. 2 (1977).

⁵³ Haldane, “Aquinas and the Active Intellect,” 205.

⁵⁴ There is a huge literature on the scholastic species theory. For an overview, see the two-volume study of Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1994 [vol. 1], 1995 [vol. 2]).

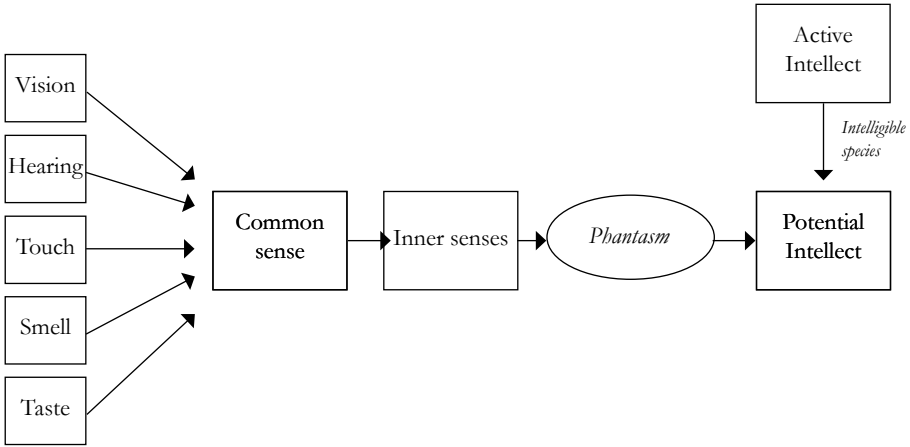


Fig. 1: “Platonized” mental faculties (Avicenna): Intelligible species are stored in the separate active intellect (“up there”), which illuminates the potential intellect. Understanding occurs when phantasms are supplied from the outside world and the internal senses that “match” the forms supplied by the active intellect.

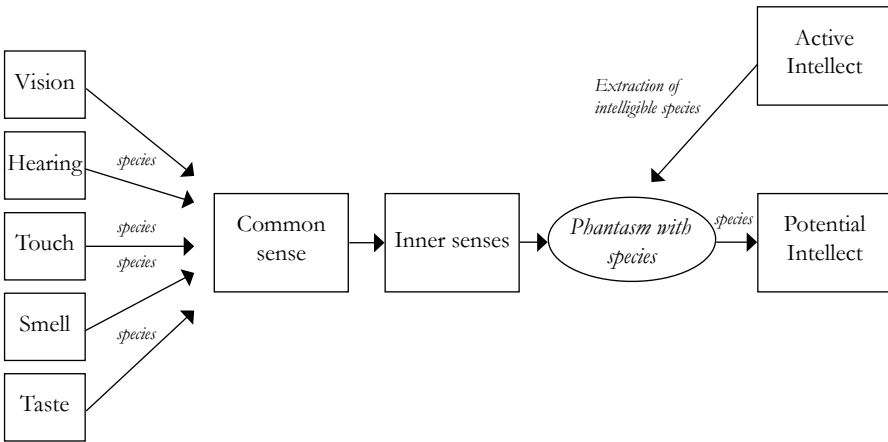


Fig. 2: Aristotelian-scholastic mental faculties (Albert, Aquinas): Intelligible species are in the things themselves (“out there”), and through a system of mediations they make imprints on the mind. The imagination creates “phantasms” that represent the species in the shape of images. The active intellect has the power to extract true species from the image and filter them into the potential intellect, which results in knowledge.

emerges from Aquinas, imagination plays a crucial function in understanding both universals and particulars as it provides the intellect with information of both, which the intellect can then use as a tool for generating understanding about physical objects in the outside world – as opposed to knowledge about universal ideas only.⁵⁵ Imagination, as the intellect’s tool, brings out the spiritual in the material.

4. From Theory to Practice: Kataphatic Spirituality and Popular Devotion

The psychological theories of mental faculties were primarily developed from the scientific and epistemological concern with figuring out how the mind is constituted and how it lets us gain knowledge of the world around us. As we have seen, these endeavours were not separated from theology. But what is more, theoretical knowledge of the mind’s faculties would also inspire new contemplative techniques. Another scholastic doctor is crucial in this development: The Franciscan Giovanni di Fidanza (1221–74), better known as the “Seraphic Doctor”, Bonaventure.

Before turning to Bonaventure’s significant contribution, however, we should recognize a few other important precursors for imagery-related practices that stand outside of the philosophical, Aristotelian–Platonic stream that we have been considering here. One particularly important vehicle of kataphatic spiritual practice is the monastic tradition, especially as it connects to the transformation of the art of memory in the early Middle Ages.⁵⁶ Less theoretically informed but all the more practically oriented, this tradition rested on the classical rhetorical instructions for creating “locations” and “images” in the mind in order to structure memory.⁵⁷ However, as Mary Carruthers has shown, the monastics went much beyond the classics. The monastic art of memory was primarily focused on crafting thoughts about God (i.e., prayers), and it was rooted in the (Platonic) injunction of the Egyptian hesychasts: *mneme theou* – remember God.⁵⁸ The notion of memory, intimately related

⁵⁵ See Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 56–61.

⁵⁶ On this, see the indispensable works by Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); cf. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (eds.), *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

⁵⁷ See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); but cf. the more up to date discussion in Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

with imagination, was such that it provided a channel to the divine. However, that channel had to be built actively by practitioners: the art of memory was a *craft*, and practitioners needed to build their own tools (e.g., written and illuminated memory devices, visualized prayers) and hone their skills through practice. Moreover, it was not just the goals and philosophical presuppositions that distinguished the monastic art of memory from its classical precursors: its techniques were also imported from elsewhere. Carruthers has shown that there is a significant influence not only from hesychasm, but also from Jewish traditions of *hekhlot* and *merkabah* mysticism. Reproducing visions of angels and heavenly palaces are typical exercises in monastic art of memory texts, where the feathers on a seraph's wing or the dimensions of Noah's ark become the "loci" that practitioners use to compose and memorize prayers.⁵⁹

Another stream that must be mentioned before we continue is the persistence of Neoplatonic ideas through the church fathers, especially Augustine. Augustine followed the common Platonic-Aristotelian fashion of seeing the imagination as an essential, but rather untrustworthy, mental faculty.⁶⁰ Although the imaginative faculty is important to the formation of memories and plays a role in cognition, it mixes sense data with beliefs in ways that lead to images of things that are not actually there, such as in dreams.⁶¹ However, it would be a mistake to conflate the untrustworthiness of the imaginative faculty with a suspicion of all mental imagery: Augustine clearly held that "phantasms" produced by the imagination are not the only kind of mental image – *true* images come from the realm of timeless forms, which for him (again following middle-Platonist orthodoxy) was the mind of God. Thus, in his Trinitarian doctrine, Augustine conceives of God the Father as the storehouse of all forms, whereas the Son (or the Word) is the *expression* of forms.⁶² The process of "illumination" by which divine light shines on the mind in order for it to gain knowledge thus mirrors the incarnation itself: Christ makes timeless truths knowable in actual human minds. All of this, however, had to do with the *intellect* rather than the imagination. This Augustinian idea remains visible in the common distinction between "corporeal", "imaginative",

⁵⁹ See examples in Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 2, 60–115.

⁶⁰ On the negative attitude that Neoplatonists displayed toward the imagination as a faculty, despite their great interest in mental imagery, see e.g. Gerald Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought* (Galway: Galway University Press, 1988); cf. Karnes, *Imagination, Mediation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 25–31.

⁶¹ On Augustine's view on the imaginative faculty, see Todd Breyfogle, "Memory and Imagination in Augustine's Confessions," *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994): 210–23.

⁶² Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 66–7.

and “intellectual visions” in Catholic doctrine, where the intellectual type is held as the highest form of mystical comprehension.⁶³

4.1 Bonaventure’s Cognitive Theology

A touch of illuminationism did, as we have seen, survive in the Aristotelian lineage that inspired thirteenth century scholasticism. The tendency of people like Albert and Aquinas was, however, to diminish rather than emphasize it. Bonaventure, a contemporary of Aquinas, went in the opposite direction: Deeply steeped in Augustinian thought, he infused the basic Aristotelian view of human cognition with a heavy dose of illuminationist epistemology. The result was a cognitive theology in which the operations of the mental faculties mirror the dynamics of God’s own mind, and divine illumination takes an active and intimate role in every cognitive act. This synthesis attributed powers to the faculty of imagination that it had never previously seen in the Aristotelian or the Platonic traditions. Moreover, Bonaventure’s project did not merely seek to lay bare the workings of the mind: It developed into a contemplative practice that promised a route to God through operations on the mind’s faculties.

The Seraphic Doctor’s cognitive theology is most fully developed in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (“The journey of the mind to God”).⁶⁴ Following Augustine in the final part of *De Trinitate*, Bonaventure saw the faculties of the human mind as a mirror of the Trinity.⁶⁵ But armed with the Aristotelian inner sense tradition, Bonaventure gives a central role to the imagination as the faculty that mediates between fallible sense impressions and true apprehension by the agent intellect. Blending Aquinas’ view of the faculties with Augustine’s illuminationism, imagination, for Bonaventure, becomes intimately connected with the incarnation of Christ. Through the incarnation, Christ was himself the perfect mediator between the material and the spiritual – simultaneously man and God in one image. The imagination’s role in cognition, according to Bonaventure, is thus a perfect analogue to the incarnation. Its images are built up from the material world of the senses, but in the act of comprehension, the divine illumination of the agent intellect reveals the intelligible species

⁶³ For a brief overview, see Lucien Roue, “Visions and Apparitions,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15477a.htm>> (accessed 18 April, 2016).

⁶⁴ For a trustworthy modern edition, see Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, ed. Stephen F. Brown, trans. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

⁶⁵ For Augustine’s analogy of the Trinity and human cognition, see especially *De Trinitate*, book XV. The interpretation of Bonaventure that follows is borrowed from Michelle Karnes.

(of divine origin) *in* the image. Taking a long step in a platonizing direction, Bonaventure replaces the agent intellect with Christ, and sees in the act of understanding a perfect analogy with Christ's descent into flesh. Through his incarnation, Christ is the super-image that guarantees safe passage from matter to spirit (or from sensation to knowledge). Thus, Christ intervenes directly every time one extracts species from phantasms – in a sense incarnating in the faculty of the imagination.⁶⁶

The *Itinerarium* is both a philosophical and a contemplative work. The practical upshot of the cognitive theory is that contemplation on the mind's own processes – how we move from sense impressions to mental images, and how we come to true understanding through “illumination” – constitutes a way to knowledge of God, and, more specifically, of the Trinity.⁶⁷ Bonaventure uses the vision of the seraph's six wings as an image to develop six stages in a contemplative exercise that starts with the contemplation of physical things and the presence of God in the natural world, proceeds via the traces or “vestiges” of God in the inner senses, and ends with ascent through the light of illumination to the “Eternal Truth” of the divine.⁶⁸ Here is Bonaventure reflecting on the intended result, when the mind has ascended to a pure intellectual vision of God:

Our mind has contemplated God outside itself through and in the vestiges; within itself through and in the image; and above itself through the similitude of the divine light shining on us from above in as far as that is possible in our pilgrim state and by the exercise of our mind. Now finally when the mind has come to the sixth step, in the first and highest Principle and in the mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ, it finds mysteries which have no likeness among creatures and which surpass the penetrating power of the human intellect. When we have contemplated all these things, it remains for the mind to pass over and transcend not only the sensible world but the soul itself. And in this passage, Christ is the way and the door. Christ is the ladder and the vehicle, like the Mercy Seat placed above the ark of God and the *mystery that has been hidden from all eternity*.⁶⁹

Besides this lofty (apophatic) mysticism, Bonaventure's cognitive theology also informed a much broader programme of kataphatic spiritual devotion. Karnes

⁶⁶ Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 89–92.

⁶⁷ The complicated and rather murky details of the Trinity's role in the mystical practice that Bonaventure prescribes is discussed by Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 99–109.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁹ Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, chapter 7, 1.

shows how Bonaventure's popular and vastly influential gospel meditations – namely the *Lignum vitae* (1260), the *Vitis mystica* (c. 1263), and *De perfectione vitae ad sorores* (1259–60) – tend to follow the same path recommended in the *Itinerarium*, from senses to mental images to illumination and knowledge of higher things. The intimate connection between the imagination and Christ makes gospel meditations a supremely powerful contemplative tool. For what if the practitioner uses the imagination – which is already analogous with the incarnation – to form images of Christ? Following Bonaventure's logic, this procedure provides intimate, first-hand access to the mystery of incarnation itself, because the phantasm of Christ created by the imagination interacts with the *actual* Christ in the form of the illumination of the agent intellect. Thus, gospel meditations are not only *about* the mystery of Christ's materiality and divinity, in the sense of being directed at a representation of it, but actually *recreate* that mystery and provide direct access to it.

While Bonaventure's cognitive-theological rationale for this practice was innovative, the kataphatic practices that he advocated would become anything but marginal. His gospel meditations contributed to what was becoming a major trend, transforming Christian religious practice in the late-medieval period: the rapid spread of practices aimed at personal piety through prayer and the contemplation of images. If we are to judge by the sheer number of surviving manuscripts, devotional literature such as the pseudo-Bonaventurean *Meditationes vitae Christi* (early-fourteenth century) and the *Stimulus amoris* (James of Milan, original late-thirteenth century, but vastly expanded upon in manuscript copies for centuries) were among the most popular spiritual texts of the later Middle Ages. In various versions and stages of completion the latter work alone exists in as many as 374 known manuscripts.⁷⁰ Indeed, the decisively most successful class of manuscript from the Middle Ages, having survived in tens of thousands of copies, is the book of hours genre – works that allowed the laity to emulate the strict prayer regimes of monastic practice.

5. Discussion: Two hypotheses about the influence of Christian kataphatic spirituality on esoteric practices

I will now return to the main question of the article: how are these imaginative practices related to the development of esotericism? The main hypothesis that I wish to defend (from now on H1) is that the popular affective piety move-

⁷⁰ Counted from data given by Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 146.

ment of the later Middle Ages, grounded in philosophical developments that emphasized the power of imagination, provided a context for practices that we now consider esoteric. In addition, I also put forward the hypothesis that the fusion of the Aristotelian inner sense tradition with a Neoplatonic epistemology that played out in high scholasticism prefigures the sense in which the imaginative faculty is understood in later esoteric sources (H2). While the second hypothesis is relatively straight forward, requiring only that we show how the combination of Aristotelian and Platonic elements characteristic of scholasticism in fact continues among the Renaissance and early modern intellectuals that are often seen as revolting against scholastic philosophy, the notion of “influence” in H1 requires us to consider in some more detail what might count as evidence for that particular thesis. I will discuss H1 and H2 in turn, giving some empirical examples. Finally, I will discuss the issue of why – despite these connections with what can only be conceived of as orthopraxy – esoteric practices have, historically, been singled out and presented as a form of “rejected knowledge”.

5.1 H1: The influence of Christian devotion on esoteric kataphatic practice

Two lines of evidence are required to support H1: evidence of *proximity* and evidence of *similarity*. By proximity, I mean evidence that establishes direct sociohistorical contact between the two practices – such as when a practitioner of A is also a practitioner of B. By similarity, I mean that concrete points of analogy can be established between practice A and B. When we have both proximity and similarity, we can argue that constitutive elements of B may have been borrowed from or influenced by A.⁷¹ Given these criteria, it goes without saying that a lot more empirical work is needed to fully establish H1 than can possibly be undertaken here. All I can do in the following discussion is point to some areas where I believe such evidence ought to be sought.

I have already suggested that the element of similarity rests in a shared *kataphatic practice*. In popular devotion and esoteric practices alike (think, for example, of the practices now classed under “Christian theurgy”⁷² or, perhaps,

⁷¹ Technically, “similarity” alone is about analogical comparisons, while similarity with proximity establishes a homological comparison (whether diachronic or synchronic). For the intended sense of these terms, see Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33.

⁷² This category includes much that has previously been described (and dismissed) as “magic”: the *ars notoria* tradition, along with specific works such as the *Liber iuratus Honorii* and the *Liber florum*, along with later forms of “angel magic” and “crystal gazing” all belong to this category. For a definition, see Claire Fanger, “Introduction,” in idem (ed.), *Invoking Angels:*

“Western learned magic”⁷³), we find techniques that regulate the practitioner’s attention to mental imagery, typically with an explicit religious content, and stress the possibility of receiving some form of illumination or insight through sustained practice.⁷⁴ The constitutive element that interests me is, in other words, not so much a likeness in superficial features, such as specific symbols, the wording of a prayer, or even the goal of the practice. Instead, what matters is that the employed *techniques*, or the *means* of the practices are analogous. In terms of my earlier discussion of “composite ascriptions”, we might even contrast an “esoteric” kataphatic practice (such as the *Liber iuratus*’s quest for a vision of the face of God) from a kataphatic practice of mainstream Christian piety in terms of similarity in ACTION but difference in GOAL. Since I am defining kataphatic practices in terms of their actions rather than their goals, to establish that one kataphatic practice inspired the emergence of a new one (as contrasted with a mere stylistic influence) one must focus on the steps that make up these patterned practices and how they work with cognitive dispositions for the cultivation of mental imagery – rather than what precise meanings they attach to such imagery and to the ultimate goals of the operation. In other words, a serious analysis of these features requires that the terms of the comparison are grounded in solid knowledge of how mental imagery cultivation works.⁷⁵

In terms of establishing evidence of proximity between such practices, I will make two observations. First, the medieval affective piety movement, which was spurred on in part by the scholastic rehabilitation of imagination, was massively popular. Hence, most European Christians would be proximate to it, if not necessarily expertly skilled. Since “esotericism” does *not* exist as a

Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 16–18. For an overview of its scope in the Middle Ages, see the other contributions to the same volume.

⁷³ This category, which is much broader than “Christian theurgy,” has recently been proposed as a useful conceptual tool for organizing diachronic research on “magic” by Bernd-Christian Otto, “Historicising ‘Western Learned Magic’: Preliminary Remarks,” *Aries* 16, no. 2 (2016): 161–240.

⁷⁴ For an insightful attempt to disentangle the mental techniques involved in *ars notoria* and related practices, see Frank Klaassen, “Subjective Experience and the Practice of Medieval Ritual Magic,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7, no. 1 (2012).

⁷⁵ On this issue, see Asprem, “Explaining the Esoteric Imagination.” For a useful discussion of what such a comparative analysis might look like, see Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 149–60. Taves draws, among other things, on medieval gospel meditations and contemporary Pagan visualization techniques. See also Taves and Asprem, “Experience as Event: Event Cognition and (Religious) Experience,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (2016): 1–25.

separate “tradition” apart from the broader religious culture (at least not until the nineteenth century), it is simply to be expected that broad trends of the general culture would shape what we have retrospectively come to single out as “esoteric” elements in that culture. The fact that most people were already acquainted with techniques for cultivating mental imagery may help explain why the complex kataphatic procedures of the *ars notoria* were apparently spreading so rapidly in precisely the same period.

However, we can also make a more specific point by homing in on the sociocultural demographic that was most active in developing and disseminating esoteric practices in medieval Europe. As is well known, priests, monks, and students of theology are overrepresented. Esoteric practices took shape in what Richard Kieckhefer has famously called the “clerical underworld”, where young, often itinerant people aspiring to the priesthood copied and shared manuscripts, borrowing elements from the liturgy as they went along.⁷⁶ It is already well established that the exorcism manuals distributed to minor clerics made a permanent mark on so-called nigromantic practices. We also know that John the Monk’s *Liber florum* was not only written by a Benedictine monk given to visions from a young age, but that despite several public condemnations and book burnings it was precisely Benedictine networks that continued to spread and copy the book, eventually preserving it to the present day.⁷⁷ Sophie Page’s study of St. Augustine’s Abbey in Canterbury (more Benedictines) as a site for the collection, copying, and practice of the full range of available magical procedures provides further evidence of the importance of this learned, ordained audience to the development of esoteric practice.⁷⁸ These influential practitioners were most certainly in close proximity to kataphatic devotional literature. In fact, they were the experts.

5.2 H2: “The esoteric imagination” prefigured by the scholastic fusion of inner senses with Neoplatonism

H2 is a less ambitious claim, and only requires us to show that the esoteric notion of “imagination” among Renaissance and early modern intellectuals shows some continuity with the scholastic combination of Aristotelian and Platonic elements.⁷⁹ It will suffice to mention a couple of examples. First, Marsilio

⁷⁶ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 151–75.

⁷⁷ See especially the beautiful treatment in Fanger, *Rewriting Magic: An Exegesis of the Visionary Autobiography of a Fourteenth-Century French Monk* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

⁷⁸ Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

⁷⁹ It is worth noting that the connection between scholastic and esoteric thought has been

Ficino (1433–99) is typically considered the chief exponent of Renaissance Neoplatonism and is often given a central place in historical overviews of the “vis imaginativa” in what is presumed to be a heavily Platonic esotericism.⁸⁰ Such narratives, which we find reproduced by key esotericism scholars like Faivre, Goodrick-Clarke, Versluis and others, tend to emphasize the power of imagination as a Platonic innovation over the impotent and passive imaginative faculty of Aristotle and his scholastic henchmen. There is only one problem with this story: Ficino’s account of the inner senses is lifted wholeheartedly from the scholastic tradition! It is true that the Neoplatonic element in Ficino is what makes the imaginative faculty particularly powerful, but this, we have seen, was the case already with Bonaventure and to a smaller degree with Albert and Aquinas. As John Cocking concludes, after summarizing Ficino’s (inconsistent) pronouncements on sensation, the inner senses, and the intellect in *Theologia Platonica*:

[O]n all these topics Ficino has nothing to add to the traditional views of the Neoplatonists, the Arabs and the Scholastics; nor does he favour any one particular scheme of things rather than another – he simply adopts the common features of all such accounts of the mind and its faculties and the kinds of experience involving images.⁸¹

Similar things can be said about Ficino’s reinterpretation of Plotinus’ daemons as working on the faculty of imagination (which is an example of Aristotelianizing Neoplatonism rather than Platonizing Aristotle),⁸² and about his passionate defence of the survival of human personality after death.⁸³

recognised by some modern esotericists knowledgeable about Catholicism. The twentieth-century Catholic esoteric author, Valentin Tomberg, recognised the deep compatibility of “high scholasticism” with what he considered to be “Hermetic” thought – even with explicit reference to Bonaventure. Faivre touched tangentially on this issue in his analysis of Tomberg: see Faivre, “Analysis of the *Meditations* of Valentin Tomberg on the Twenty-Two Major Arcana of the Tarot of Marseille,” in idem, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 194.

⁸⁰ See for example Faivre, “*Vis Imaginativa*,” 100–101.

⁸¹ John Cocking, *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1991), 175.

⁸² This Aristotelian (or rather, scholastic) reinterpretation of the daemon takes place in Ficino’s translation of the *Enneads*. Moreover, it is largely a riff on Iamblichus, who already synthesized Aristotelian faculty psychology with a Platonic framework (see e.g. *De Mysteriis*, 3.30). See Anna Corrias, “From Daemonic Reason to Daemonic Imagination: Plotinus and Marsilio Ficino on the Soul’s Tutelary Spirit,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2013).

⁸³ Anna Corrias, “Imagination and Memory in Marsilio Ficino’s Theory of the Vehicles of the Soul,” *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 6 (2012).

The latter was delivered as an attack on contemporary Averroism, and its motivation is thus entirely analogous with Aquinas's *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, written almost exactly two centuries earlier. Brian Copenhaver even argues, on the basis of textual similarities, that Ficino simply copied Averroes' alleged views from Aquinas' description in his attack on them.⁸⁴ Again, what Ficino contributed was not so much a criticism of something that scholastics accepted as a new way of using Neoplatonic elements to back up what were otherwise entirely orthodox scholastic claims: instead of drawing the higher soul (active intellect) down into the embodied soul, as did Aquinas, Ficino held that the lower soul containing the inner senses was, in fact, capable of surviving death. He did this by attaching the Aristotelian inner senses (in particular imagination and memory) to the pneumatic body or vehicle of the Neoplatonists. This move harmonized quite easily with the ventricular theory of the faculties common at the time, which held that the faculties were associated with the flow of air (*pneuma*) through the ventricles of the brain rather than with the biological tissue of the brain itself.⁸⁵

If we fast forward to the early modern period and look at the famous illustration of the cognitive system in Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi historia* ("History of the two worlds", 1617–21), we find once again that it tallies with the inner senses tradition of the Aristotelian, Islamic, and scholastic psychologists (fig. 3).⁸⁶ Fludd lodges "imagination" between "sensation" and "mind", with a window on to the *mundus imaginabilis*, the "shadows" of the physical world. The scholastic interpretation of Aristotle's agent intellect acting on the passive intellect through illumination is still echoed in Fludd's connection of God and the angels with the "intellectual world", influencing the "mind" and playing a direct part in assessing the images sent forward from imagination. True, Fludd's way of connecting the faculties to broader cosmological realities composed of three distinct worlds – as well as how he explains phenomena such as prophecy and the occult mantic arts⁸⁷ – is deeply Neoplatonic. But the

⁸⁴ Copenhaver, "Ten Arguments in Search of a Philosopher: Averroes and Aquinas in Ficino's *Platonic Theology*," *Vivarium* 47, no. 4 (2009).

⁸⁵ A theory that was, in fact, a retrograde development from the physiologically superior views of Galen and Avicenna. On the complicated and murky history of ventricular theory, see Christopher D. Green, "Where Did the Ventricular Localization of Mental Faculties Come From?," *Journal of History of the Behavioral Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2003).

⁸⁶ See Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi historia, Tomus secundus de supernaturali, naturali, præternaturali, Microcosmi historia, in Tractatus tres distributa* (Oppenheim: Johann Theodore de Bry, 1619), first tractate, section I, book X, p. 217.

⁸⁷ C. H. Josten, "Robert Fludd's Theory of Geomancy and His Experiences at Avignon in

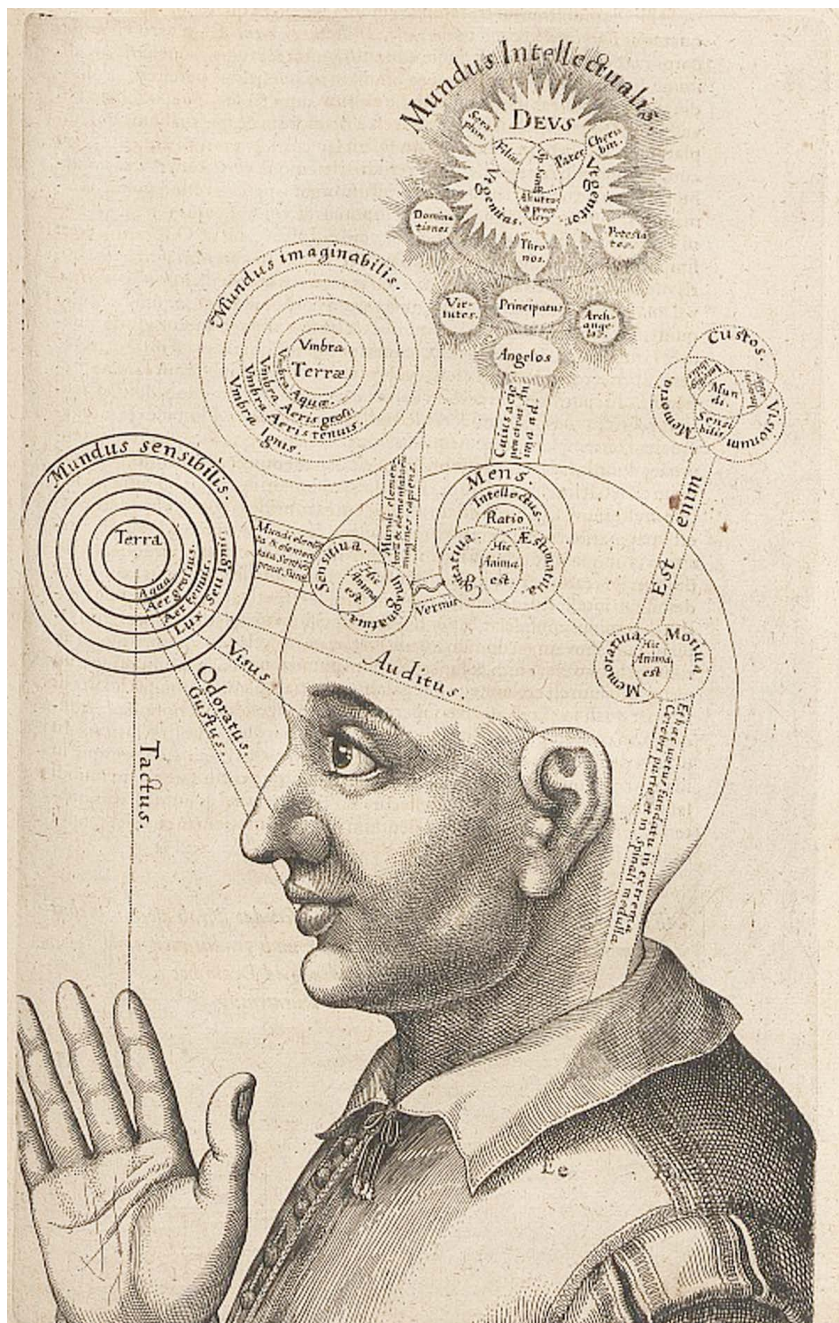


Fig 3. The inner senses according to Robert Fludd

basic grasp of the cognitive system, including the central place of imagination itself as a mediator between the material and the spiritual, is the heritage of high scholasticism.

5.3 The Construction of Heteropraxy

In closing this discussion we should consider one final question: Why, given their common philosophical frameworks and imagery-based techniques, have we come to see some of these kataphatic practices as “esoteric” and others simply as “Christian”? This point concerns the historical production of “rejected knowledge”, and its often anachronistic projection backward to earlier periods or to other cultures: Through processes of theological exclusion and policing of cultural boundaries, theologians and secular scholars alike have created and reproduced divisions between in- and out-groups in matters of “orthodoxy”.⁸⁸ This has led to a proliferation of disjunctions, whereby very similar practices end up being interpreted as radically different, or even opposite in intent and character.⁸⁹ Disjunctions are the usual story with esotericism, whether we are talking about the bifurcation of “chymistry” into alchemy and chemistry, the separation of astronomy from astrology, or the pluralization of kataphatic spirituality that concerns us here. The focus on practice that I have suggested means that we should expand our focus from the construction of heterodoxy to the construction of heteropraxy. Since practice is more readily observable by authorities than beliefs, it seems likely that ecclesiastically enforced disjunctive strategies should focus on ritual creativity and innovations on practice that are perceived as “deviant”.⁹⁰ However, when such innovations have been separated out and stigmatized as illicit, this may in fact endow these practices with a selective advantage among certain demographics, precisely due to their allegedly subversive character. As Leen Spruit has argued, the indexes of illicit literature created by the Catholic Church in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance came to serve as lists of recommended reading for Protestant reformers, religious dissidents, and those desiring forbidden knowledge.⁹¹ If

the Winter of 1601 to 1602,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964).

⁸⁸ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

⁸⁹ On disjunctive strategies and their impact on our interpretation of history, see especially von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion*, 25–55.

⁹⁰ On the difficulties involved in determining the “deviance” of what are often rather popular and widespread practices, see the discussion in Otto, “Historicising ‘Western Learned Magic’,” 203–207.

⁹¹ Leen Spruit, “Censorship and Canon: A Note on Some Medieval Works and Authors,” in *How the West Was Won: On the Problems of Canon and Literary Imagination, with a Special Emphasis*

Rome forbade it, Protestant printers loved to sell it.

I already touched on what seems a crucial process in the creation of heteropraxy, namely what we might call a “displacement of goals”.⁹² In a Catholic context, focusing intently on one’s mental imagery guided by exceptional cleanliness and prayer is seen as a noble thing if the image is the passion of Christ and the goal to comprehend God’s suffering and sacrifice on behalf of humanity. When the same techniques are oriented toward images of angels with the intent of gaining knowledge of the liberal arts, the practice is considered dangerous magic and the books instructing it should be committed to the flames. John of Morigny’s *Liber florum* remains a good example: the book’s condemnation and burning in Paris in 1323 secured its status of heteropraxy, commanding the need for caution and secrecy, but also adding an attractive aura of transgressive power to those seeking forbidden fruit in the clerical underworld. These observations offer clues for further research on the creation of heteropraxy in the Middle Ages, whether through Aquinas’ theological condemnation of *ars notoria*, the inclusion of various unnamed works of necromancy, geomancy, and witchcraft among Bishop Tempier’s condemnations of 1277, or the physical extermination of practice manuals, as in the case of *Liber florum*.⁹³

6. Conclusion

Looking at practices related to the imagination provides additional evidence that “esotericism” is an endogenous phenomenon in European religious history, which has gradually been separated out by disjunctive strategies rooted in the policing of orthopraxy. Particularly, I have argued that esoteric practice is intimately interwoven with the development of kataphatic spiritual practices with a basis in medieval theories of imagination that are rooted in the Arabic tradition of commentary on Aristotle. Based on this narrative, I have formulated two hypotheses: that esoteric kataphatic practices owe much to

on the Middle Ages, ed. W. Otten, A. Vanderjagt, and H. de Vries (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 177.

⁹² This is meant in rough analogy to the sociological notion of goal displacement, which focuses on how an instrumental activity originally pursued to obtain some goal may, over time, become a goal in its own right. This is a key characteristic of bureaucracies. See e.g. W. Keith Warner and A. Eugene Havens, “Goal Displacement and the Intangibility of Organizational Goals,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1968): 539–55.

⁹³ On the condemnations of Bishop Tempier, see John Wippel, “The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris.”

developments in late-medieval Christian piety, and that “esoteric” conceptions of imagination are indebted to the scholastic fusion of Aristotelian faculty psychology and Neoplatonic illuminationist theology. I have discussed some evidence that might support both hypotheses, but have suggested that more empirical work is called for. In conclusion, I wish to list what I see as the three most important domains on which such future empirical work should focus.

First, more attention needs to be given to the Medieval period, both as a context for the emergence of key practices and for the development of exclusionary strategies that form later disjunctions between orthopraxy and heteropraxy in the domain of kataphatic spirituality. Historians of magic have already paved the way; scholars of esotericism should work to integrate these studies fully into their narratives, and bring in a diachronic perspective that allows us to see how medieval developments shaped later esoteric currents. Secondly, the story I have told here suggests that the scholastic as opposed to the humanist roots of Renaissance and early modern esotericism still deserves further investigation. Do we, perhaps, need to get rid of the artificial markers of epochs such as “Medieval” and “Renaissance” in order to negate the boundary-work that the humanists so successfully put in place to distinguish themselves from the scholastics? Or do we, after all, want to make a bold argument in favour of the radical novelty of the Neoplatonic syntheses of the fifteenth century – even though such syntheses have their obvious precursors? Whichever way we want to settle these questions, it seems evident that we cannot tell the esotericism story in terms of Aristotle versus Plato (and Hermes and Zarathustra): the ancient sages were hybridized in the minds of philosophers and theologians long before some wealthy Italian patrons paid scholars to philosophize in private palaces instead of universities and monasteries.

Third, the Islamic background of core ideas and practices deserves much more attention. Again, intellectual historians focusing on magic and science have laid the foundations long ago. So far, it is mostly “occult sciences” like astrology and magic that have caught the attention of scholars of esotericism.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ See for example the recent work of Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), which focuses on astrology. Medievalists studying magic have made major contributions to this line of research for decades. See especially the works of Charles Burnett – too numerous to be listed here, but see e.g. Burnett, *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages: The Translators and their Intellectual and Social Contacts* (London: Routledge, 2009); Burnett, *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996); Burnett and Contadini (eds.), *Islam and the Italian Renaissance* (London: Warburg Institute Colloquia, 1999).

In addition to this important work we also need to look carefully at the Islamic context of quite orthodox ideas on human nature and humanity's relation to the natural world and to God. In short, historicizing the imaginative faculty and unweaving its connections with practices and theological doctrines forces us to question some of the foundational assumptions of the field, pushing the study of “esotericism” backwards in history and outwards from Europe, to the Islamicate world and beyond.

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The “Baphomet” of Eliphas Lévi: Its Meaning and Historical Context

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Abstract

Although the Baphomet drawn by Eliphas Lévi (i.e., Alphonse-Louis Constant, 1810–1875) is one of the most famous esoteric images worldwide, very little is known about its context of emergence. It is well established that it has to be seen as a symbolic representation of Lévi’s magnetistic-magical concept of the Astral Light, but the historical background of this meaning remains largely obscure. This article demonstrates that a historical contextualization of the Baphomet leads to an understanding of its meaning that is significantly different from prevalent interpretations. It will firstly be shown that the formation of Lévi’s historical narrative can only be comprehended in the light of his radical socialist writings from the 1840s. It will then be discussed which sources he used to elaborate and re-signify this narrative. Secondly, it will be investigated how Lévi developed his magical theory in the 1850s by focusing on the contexts of “spiritualistic magnetism,” Spiritism, and Catholicism. This analysis will show that the Baphomet should be seen as more than a symbolization of Lévi’s magical theory. It is the embodiment of a politically connoted tradition of “true religion” which would realize a synthesis of religion, science, and politics.

Keywords

Eliphas Lévi; Baphomet; occultism; socialism; Catholicism; magnetism



(Figure 1)

1. Introduction

Eliphas Lévi's androgynous, goat-headed “Baphomet” is one of the most widely spread images with esoteric background. The drawing was originally published in the first *livraisons* of Lévi's famous *Dogme de la haute magie*, published by Guiraudet et Jouaust in 1854, and featured as the frontispiece for the two-volume edition of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, published by Germer Baillière in 1855–1856, and for the extended second edition of 1861 (figure 1). Today, the image and its countless variations are highly popular in new religious movements and subcultures, most notably the various metal or gothic scenes. It is frequently used in decidedly provocative counter-cultural contexts. In 2015, the so-called Satanic Temple unveiled a massive monument inspired by the Baphomet drawing. The statue was intended as a tongue-in-cheek protest against what was perceived as an improperly close relationship between religion and the state. The organizers, who successfully attracted enormous media interest, could draw on a close association between the Baphomet, devil worship, and Satanism that had been established at least since the 1960s but reaches back to the end of the nineteenth century.¹ In this context, the Baphomet is

¹ Cf. Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*, 2nd ed. (London: Rider, 1975), 206–18 and Ruben van Luijk, “Satan Rehabilitated? A Study Into Satanism During the Nineteenth Century” (Dissertation, Universiteit van Tilburg, 2013), 241–323.

often—and erroneously—identified with an inverted pentagram superimposed on a goat’s head, a symbol that was first indicated by Eliphas Lévi himself and later visualized by occultists such as Stanislas de Guaita (1861–1897), in his *Clef de la magie noire* from 1897.² This variant was perhaps most prominently used by Anton Szandor LaVey (1930–1997) in his *Satanic Bible* (1969), where it is explicitly identified as “Baphomet.” It does not come as a surprise, then, that the Baphomet is often associated with Satanism and anti-Christian attitudes.

At the same time, it is well known that Eliphas Lévi hardly qualifies as a Satanist, and that the meaning of the drawing, as ghastly as it may appear to the beholder, is neither satanic nor anti-Christian. There is a wealth of academic and non-academic literature that points out Lévi’s intention: a symbolization of the equilibrium of opposites. The magnetistic connotation of this concept was made very explicit by the author, and both early esoteric recipients such as Helena Blavatsky, in 1877, and later scholars such as Christopher McIntosh, in 1975, emphasized this.³ While it is very easy to learn about the notion of the “Astral Light” that formed the foundation of Lévi’s magnetistic theory, almost no attention has been paid to the actual historical context in which he developed his understanding of the Baphomet.⁴ Although it is obvious that Lévi related it to the Knights Templar, the actual sources he used to develop the historical narrative in which he located the Templars has not been investigated. This is mainly due to the fact that most observers more or less implicitly accept the idea that Lévi was the continuator of an esoteric tradition, a *rénovateur de l’occultisme*, who was less dependent on the historical context of the 1840s and 1850s than on ancient esoteric doctrines.⁵

² Cf. Eliphas Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., vol. 2 (Paris/London/New York: Germer Baillière, 1861), 93–94, 98, and Stanislas de Guaita, *Essais de sciences maudites, vol. 2: Le Serpent de la Genèse, seconde septaine: La clef de la magie noire* (Paris: Henri Durville, 1920), 417.

³ Cf. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York/London: J. W. Bouton/Bernard Quaritch, 1877), 137–38; *The Secret Doctrine. The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, 3rd ed., 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1893), 273–74 and McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi*, 150.

⁴ With the notable exception of Karl Baier, *Meditation und Moderne. Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), 265–77.

⁵ This was established by Paul Chacornac, *Eliphas Lévi. Rénovateur de l’Occultisme en France (1810–1875)* (Paris: Chacornac Frères, 1989), who reproduced narratives that were developed by French occultists such as Papus or Stanislas de Guaita. See Julian Strube, *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts. Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi*, *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 590–618.

In what follows, it will be shown that Lévi's Baphomet appears in a different light if it is historically contextualized. When developing his historical narrative, Lévi was informed by scholarly debates about the emergence and early development of Christianity, which often revolved around the question of "true" religion and its role in contemporary society. The meaning and intention of this narrative can only be comprehended if one takes into consideration the ideas that he had propagated in the 1840s under his civil name Alphonse-Louis Constant, when he was known as one of the most notorious socialist radicals.⁶ At that time, he claimed to be the representative of a "true" Catholicism which he opposed to the corrupted Christianity of the Churches, and which he vehemently identified with "true" socialism. He regarded himself as the latest representative of a long tradition of revolutionary heretics who struggled for the realization of a universal religious *association*. In the 1850s, he re-signified and elaborated this narrative, now identifying "occultism" with "true Catholicism" and, at times more or less explicitly, with "true socialism."⁷ His Baphomet has to be seen as an iconic representation of this "true" doctrine, as the Knights Templar were considered to be the successors of the very same heretical revolutionary tradition that reached back to the "Gnostics" of the late ancient School of Alexandria, the environment where the momentous separation between "true" and "false" religion supposedly took place. In this light, the Baphomet is not only a magnetistic symbol representing Lévi's theory of magic, but first and foremost an embodiment of the one and only true tradition whose ultimate goal is the establishment of a perfect social order.

2. Lévi's Depiction of the Baphomet

It is relatively easy to trace the visual inspirations of Lévi's notorious drawing. Obviously, the Baphomet is depicted by Lévi primarily as a goat-like figure, which is further emphasized by its identification with the "Goat of Mendes" or the "sabbatical goat." Depictions of a horned, goat-like demonic creature, or the devil himself, were widespread. When Lévi wrote his books, the topos of a goat being present at witches' sabbaths had been commonplace for centuries. Having

⁶ As this article focuses on the period when Constant wrote under his new pseudonym, he will only be referred to as Eliphas Lévi. His publications, however, will be listed using the name under which they were published.

⁷ Julian Strube, "Socialist Religion and the Emergence of Occultism: A Genealogical Approach to Socialism and Secularization in 19th-Century France," *Religion* 46, no. 3 (2016): 371–79.

received an ecclesiastical education, Lévi did repeatedly mention several “classics” of demonology, such as Jean Bodin’s famous *De la demonomanie des sorciers* (1580), but he only referred to or cited more recent works, such as Augustin Calmet’s *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits et sur les vampires* (1758) and Jean Baptiste Thiers’ *Traité des superstitions qui regardent les sacrements* (1697), where the sabbatical goat is discussed.⁸ On a graphical level, most readers will be familiar with prints such as those of the *Compendium maleficarum* (1608) that show a goat-headed, winged Devil who bears much resemblance to Lévi’s Baphomet (figure 2). Due to the omnipresence of similar depictions, it is both impossible and needless to determine a limited set of sources for this motif. But there is little doubt that the most direct inspiration for the Baphomet drawing was the Tarot card “Le Diable” from the Marseille deck (figure 3), which was regarded by Lévi as the finest surviving version.⁹ Some other influences are more or less explicitly mentioned, namely the famous alchemical androgyne in Heinrich Khunrath’s *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1595, figure 4), as well as a print from 1639 which joins Clovis Hesteau de Nuysement’s *Traitez de l’harmonie et constitution generale du vray sel, secret des philosophes, et de l’esprit universel du monde* together with other alchemical tracts (figure 5).¹⁰ In the beginning of his *Dogme*, Lévi provided a fairly detailed description of how he understood the symbolism of each element of his eclectically assembled figure.¹¹

⁸ Among those, the numerous references to Calmet in Alphonse-Louis Constant, *Dictionnaire de littérature chrétienne*, ed. Abbé Migne (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1851), e.g. 249; Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 286–88 and to Thiers in Constant, *Dictionnaire*, 384; Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 308. Cf. the original passages in Augustin Calmet, *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits et sur les vampires*, vol. 1 (Senones: Joseph Pariset, 1769), 119–20 and Jean Baptiste Thiers, *Traité des superstitions qui regardent les sacrements*, vol. 2 (Paris: Antoine Dezallier, 1697), 365–68.

⁹ Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 172. Lévi mentioned the “Italian Tarot,” which at the time signified the Tarot of Marseille, as well as the Tarot of Besançon, which was based on the Marseille deck. For further information on Lévi and the Tarot, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 442–45, 78–79, 500–01, 61–463 and Ronald Decker, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards: The origins of the Occult Tarot* (London: Duckworth, 1996), esp. 166–93.

¹⁰ See Clovis Hesteau de Nuysement, *Traitez de l’harmonie et constitution générale du vray sel, secret des philosophes, et de l’esprit universelle du monde, suivant le troisieme principe du Cosmopolite* (La Haye: Theodore Maire, 1639), between the preface and the dedication, cf. Eliphas Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 236 and *ibid.*, 2: 208, 22–23. For more about Hesteau de Nuysement, see Kathleen P. Long, *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe: Women and Gender in the Early Modern World* (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 137–62. About the engravings in Khunrath, see Peter J. Forshaw, “‘Alchemy in the Amphitheatre’: Some Consideration of the Alchemical Content of the Engravings in Heinrich Khunrath’s ‘Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom,’” in *Art and Alchemy*, ed. Jacob Wamberg (Kopenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006).

¹¹ Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 1, VI–VII. Cf. *Ibid.*, 2: 211–12 and *La clef des grands mystères* (Paris:



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)



(Figure 4)



(Figure 5)

Apart from these visual aspects, the magnetistic context of the Baphomet was expressed repeatedly by Lévi, his publishers, and his critics. In 1854, Guiraudet et Jouaust advertised for *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* with an extract from the first volume, which at that time was still a work in progress.¹² The selected passage, which has been abbreviated for the advertisement, is still among the most quoted from Lévi's oeuvre:

There exists in nature a force which is much more powerful than steam. ... This force was known to the ancients: it consists of a universal agent whose supreme law is equilibrium, and whose direction is concerned immediately with the great arcanum of transcendental magic. ... This agent, which barely manifests itself under the trial and error of the disciples of Mesmer, is exactly what the adepts of the Middle Ages called the first matter of the great work. The Gnostics represented it as the fiery body of the Holy Spirit, and it was the object of adoration in the secret rites of the Sabbath or the Temple, under the hieroglyphic figure of Baphomet or the Androgynous Goat of Mendes.¹³

This passages makes perfectly clear that *Dogme et rituel* was presented and understood as a magnetistic work, which wanted to distance itself from Mesmerist publications. It is remarkable that Lévi did not attempt to challenge other magnetists on the grounds of practical experiments; instead his argument was a thoroughly *historical* one. Claiming to possess the key to a tradition of superior secret, ancient knowledge, he dismissed the “Mesmerists” as amateurish dabblers who could only guess what powers they are dealing with. The protagonists of Lévi's tradition are openly named: the medieval “adepts” who were the successors of the ancient Gnostics, most prominent among them the Templars who worshipped the Baphomet. Lévi did not claim to depict the exact idol that was supposedly the object of adoration of medieval adepts, but he did claim to present an allegorical drawing of the ideas that were represented by it. First and foremost, he described the Baphomet as a “pantheistic and magical figure of the absolute” and identified it with Pan.¹⁴ It

Baillière, 1861), 234.

¹² A note informed the readers in the future tense that “this work will be limited to 500” copies and “will be composed of 20 livraisons,” in addition to the present one. Subscribers “before October 15th, 1854” would receive a discount, and if “it should need more than 20 livraisons to complete this work” the additional numbers would be free. This allows for a dating *ante quem* and shows that the eventual size of the volume was as yet unclear.

¹³ Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 83–84. The translations in this article do not rely on Waite's translations of Lévi's works.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, VI.

was much more than an imaginative symbol for a magnetistic theory. It stood for a specific secret tradition that formed the key to the understanding of the true form of religion. The narrative that forms this “traditional” background of the Baphomet has, until recently, not been historically contextualized. It will be shown that the Baphomet is more than a bricolage of older esoteric traditions. Its meaning can only be understood in the context of the 1840s and 1850s.

3. Lévi’s Historical Narrative and its Sources

The fundamental idea behind Lévi’s writings was the existence of a single, true tradition that resulted from a primitive revelation.¹⁵ Due to a series of degenerations and misinterpretations destroying this pristine unity, the religious traditions of humanity had multiplied, but they all carried traces of the universal divine dogma. Explaining the meaning of the pentagram that adorns the Baphomet’s head, Lévi declared that “every new cult is just a new route to lead humanity to the one religion, that of the sacred and the radiant pentagram, the sole eternal *Catholicism*.”¹⁶ It has already been indicated that Lévi had identified as the representative of “true” Catholicism since his radical writings of the 1840s, a self-understanding that he constantly articulated in his occultist writings. The major influence on his Catholic identity was the famous priest Félicité de Lamennais (1782–1854), the founder of a so-called “Neo-Catholic” movement that sought to establish a progressive form of Catholicism that was marked by a rationalistic and scientific stance. After spectacularly breaking with Rome, Lamennais turned to a Christian socialism in 1834 that inspired a whole generation of young socialists, including Lévi, who was perceived by contemporaries as one of his most radical disciples.¹⁷ A key concept of Lamennais and other Neo-Catholic authors was the *révélation primitive*, a theory that sought to prove the eternal and exclusive truth of Catholicism on the basis of “historical evidence” gathered from all religious traditions.¹⁸ Lévi’s approach to history decisively relied on this theory, as becomes most obvious in the light of his

¹⁵ See, e.g., *Histoire de la magie* (Paris: Baillière, 1860), 256.

¹⁶ *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 98.

¹⁷ Strube, “Socialist Religion,” 372; “Ein neues Christentum. Frühsozialismus, Neo-Katholizismus und die Einheit von Religion und Wissenschaft,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 66, no. 2 (2014): 154–60.

¹⁸ For more details, see *Sozialismus*, 190–96; “Socialist Religion,” 377 and Arthur McCalla, “The Mennaisian ‘Catholic Science of Religion’: Epistemology and History in Early Nineteenth-Century French Study,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21, no. 3 (2009).

constant emphasis on the true tradition being nothing else but “Catholicism.”¹⁹ Similar to Neo-Catholic writers, he certainly did not seek to abolish the Church but to reform it and establish its true character, which would eventually lead to a universal—that is literally “Catholic”—religion of humanity. However, his attitude towards the *status quo* of the Church was much more radical in that it was marked by an aggressive anti-clericalism, directed not against the office of the priest but against the corrupted holders of this office.²⁰

This concerns one of the aspects that can be most confusing for the readers of Lévi’s works. His occultist narrative is marked by an ambiguousness that often appears incoherent and self-contradictory. He constantly emphasizes the need for the “authority and hierarchy” of the Church while denouncing it as corrupted in the most aggressive terms.²¹ In a similar vein, he frequently attacked the supposed holders of pristine knowledge—such as the Gnostics, the Templars, or the Freemasons—as corrupted and ignorant, while at the same time depicting them as the heirs of the one and only secret tradition. Although it can hardly be denied that there are numerous inconsistencies in Lévi’s narrative, especially when one compares the volumes of *Dogme et rituel* with his later works, it gains a lot of clarity when one realizes that he understood the succession of “adepts” as a history of repeated corruptions. From early on, the wise bearers of the one true dogma saw the need to conceal it from the “masses,” but at some point they lost the key to its understanding, which required another generation of initiates to take up the noble task of handing it down.²²

Lévi made his ideas known to a broader readership for the first time in a series of articles published between 1855 and 1857 in a socialist journal,

¹⁹ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 404–05, 93–501.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 505. Unlike his fellows, Lamennais turned his back on Roman Catholicism after his break with the Holy See and proclaimed a “religion of humanity.” This is a notable contrast to Constant, who never renounced his Catholic identity.

²¹ Lévi, *Clef*, 40–41: “Aussi regardez les prêtres indignes, contemplez ces prétendus serviteurs de l’autel. Que disent à votre cœur ces hommes gras ou cadavéreux, aux yeux sans regards, aux lèvres pincées ou béantes ? ... Ils prient comme ils dorment et ils sacrifient comme ils mangent. Ce sont des machines à pain, à viande, à vin, et à paroles vides de sens.” Cf. *Ibid.*, 6: “... dans l’Eglise hiérarchique et divinement autorisée, il n’y a jamais eu et il n’y aura jamais ni mauvais papes ni mauvais prêtres. Mauvais et prêtre sont deux mots qui ne s’accordent pas.” *Nota bene* that Lévi talks about the “true” form of the Church here.

²² This is further complicated by the fact that Lévi had adopted the notion of *palingénésie* from the writings of Pierre-Simon Ballanche, which implied that the history of humanity was marked by a succession of stages where one essentially true and eternal dogma went through a progressive transformation. Strube, *Sozialismus*, 131, 98, 357, 80, 449, 99, 507; cf. “Socialist Religion,” 367.

the *Revue philosophique et religieuses*—notably using his civil name.²³ In “The Kabbalistic Origins of Christianity” he declared that the Kabbalah (or what he understood under this term) was the core of true Christianity and thus the carrier of the “universal tradition” that he opposed to the corrupted doctrine of the established Churches. This separation was initiated by the burning of the works of Hermes and Pythagoras by Saint Paul—the moment when “Christianity emancipated itself” by “lighting the fire of the stake of his mother.” This negation of the old tradition was necessary to create a new synthesis “in the name of the original and traditional dogma against the despotic and ignorant interpretations of the degenerated priesthood.” With his actions, Paul followed the “pacifistic revolutionary” Jesus Christ, a successor of Osiris, Orpheus, Moses “and all great men of enlightenment.”²⁴ However, this chain of initiates was first interrupted when a schism took place between Paul and John. Lévi clearly took the side of the latter, who was initiated by Jesus and wrote his Apocalypse in the “hieroglyphic language” handed down to him. The meaning of this language had been lost by “the official Roman Church,” while the goal of the “Platonic” and “Kabbalistic” doctrine of John, as of all “true Kabbalists” and “high initiates,” was “the realization of the divine ideal in humanity.”²⁵ At the same time, Paul, a “free-thinker” eagerly seeking the emancipation of Christianity, “re-veiled” the dogma and unintentionally paved the way for “Catholic absolutism.”²⁶ The consequences were disastrous, as the followers of the Church were now misled: “From the burning of books they came to the burning of their authors.”

In the meanwhile, the true Christianity, the Kabbalistic Christianity of Saint John, has always existed and it has always protested; but it was attacked with the most hateful calumny and confused by the official asceticism, under the name of Gnosticism, with all the delirium of depraved minds: so the Christians of Saint John concealed themselves and adopted a series of signs taken from the Kabbalah to recognize each other. So began the occult initiations which attracted the whole Order of the Temple to the light, by revealing to it its veritable destination.²⁷

²³ The articles were later used in *La clef des grands mystères* (1861).

²⁴ Alphonse-Louis Constant, “Des origines cabalistiques du christianisme,” in *La revue philosophique et religieuse* (Paris: Bureaux de la Revue, 1855), 35, 40–41. Here, the concept of Palingenesis is essential for an understanding of the narrative.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 35–39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41–42. In French, Lévi made a pun playing with the words *révélateur* (revelator) and *révoilateur* (“re-veilator”).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

Thus the Templars became the torchbearers of the secret tradition of true Christianity, the “champions of humanity” who strived for the establishment of the *association universelle*—a prominent socialist concept that had been essential for Lévi’s radical writings since 1841.²⁸ In another article about “The Classics of the Kabbalah,” he emphasized that the true meaning of the Temple was “a social utopia and a symbol for the perfect government, based on an egalitarian hierarchy of intelligence and merit.”²⁹ The adversaries of this revolutionary project were “the so-called orthodox sectarians who obstinately deny progress” and “claim authorities that they do not understand”: “The ecclesiastical hierarchy is only temporary and must end when the time of the virility of humanity has come, the age of force and reason” which will bring “the second coming of Christ,” the explanation of all symbolical figures, and the erection of the Temple.³⁰ Then the universal religion will finally be realized:

But this purified religion will not be invented, it exists and it has always existed in humanity; but it had to be concealed by the sages, because the vulgar have been incapable of comprehending it. It is the tradition of all the great sanctuaries of antiquity, it is the philosophy of nature, it is God living in humanity and in the world, it is being demonstrated by being, it is reason proven by harmony, it is the analogy of the contraries, it is faith based on science and science elevated by faith.³¹

The reformist tenor of this rhetoric illustrates that Lévi had not at all abandoned his socialist thought. Given the fact that he had been imprisoned for political reasons in 1855 for the third time in his life, and that he had faced the harsh anti-socialist restrictions of the new government since the Coup of 1851, he exercised much caution in *Dogme et rituel* and the *Histoire de la magie* but apparently felt safe enough to employ a more radical language in the socialist *Revue*.³² Despite the lack of open calls for the revolutionary establishment of a socialist utopia, the narrative in the monographs was more or less the same: The “great Kabbalist John” had been initiated into the secret doctrine by his master Jesus and communicated it in his Apocalypse, “the key to Christian

²⁸ Ibid., 42–43. Cf. Strube, “Socialist Religion,” 366–67.

²⁹ Alphonse-Louis Constant, “Les classiques de la Kabbale. Second article. Les Talmudistes et le Talmud,” in *La revue philosophique et religieuse* (Paris: Bureaux de la Revue, 1856), 393. This is a typical Saint-Simonian notion.

³⁰ “Origines,” 43–44; “Classiques,” 393.

³¹ “Origines,” 45.

³² After a general amnesty, Lévi resumed to frank radicalism, beginning in *La clef des grands mystères* (1861). See Strube, “Socialist Religion,” 378–79; cf. *Sozialismus*, 565–77.

Kabbalah.”³³ Lévi put an even stronger emphasis on the Kabbalah as the essence of the primitive revelation. He also elaborated his narrative about the consequences of the “emancipation” of Christianity and the founding of an *ésotérisme chrétien*.³⁴ “The ones to be initiated did not find initiators anymore, and in the long run the directors of consciences became as ignorant as the vulgar...: the path to light was lost.”³⁵ As a consequence, the “profane” could “erect altar against altar” and cause countless schisms.³⁶ Within the Church, the last remnants of the Kabbalistic traditions were lost until the ninth century.³⁷

Against this background, it is highly significant that Lévi presented the Templars as the advocates of *johannisme*.³⁸ But he was far from hailing them as the infallible guardians of true Christianity. He maintained that “the *johannisme* of the adepts was the Kabbalah of the Gnostics, which soon degenerated into a mystical pantheism amounting to the idolatry of nature and the hatred of all revealed dogma.” Having lost the true meaning of the dogma and deceived by hubris, some of them even came to acknowledge “the pantheistic symbolism” of black magic and worshiped the “monstrous idol of Baphomet.”³⁹ Once more, the chain of initiates had been interrupted because of human error, but Lévi suggested that their teachings lived on in the *maçonnerie occulte*, while the Templars themselves, or their remnants, turned into “anarchistic” assassins.⁴⁰ The central idea behind this complex and ambivalent tangle of groups, currents, and individuals is relatively simple: by declaring that literally everybody had, at some point, lost the key to an understanding of the true tradition, Lévi could position himself as the one who had rediscovered it. He was the one who could sort out all the “truths and errors” that had resulted from the upheavals in late antiquity.⁴¹

Freemasonry

In order to understand the construction of Lévi’s tradition, it must first be

³³ Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 145, 98, cf. *Ibid.*, 2: 67; *Histoire*, 105.

³⁴ *Histoire*, 212, 126–27.

³⁵ *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 114; cf. *Histoire*, 5.

³⁶ *Histoire*, 152.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 222. Earlier, Lévi stressed that the “war against magic” had been necessary to battle “the false Gnostics”—keeping in mind that “the true science of the mages is essentially Catholic” (*ibid.*, 33).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 277, with the following differentiation: “Les templiers avaient deux doctrines, une cachée et réservée aux maîtres, c’était celle du *johannisme*; l’autre publique, c’était la doctrine *catholique-romaine*.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 280; cf. *Clef*, 219–20.

⁴¹ *Histoire*, 207.

investigated which sources he used. To begin with, any contemporary learning about the Knights Templar inevitably would have consulted literature about Freemasonry. The controversial rise and great success of neo-Templarism in the eighteenth century sparked a myriad of writings discussing the relationship between Freemasonry and the historical Templars, often in a highly polemical way.⁴² The literature about Freemasons, Templars, conspiracy theories, and related topics is so vast in the first half of the nineteenth century that, again, it would be futile to determine a fixed set of sources. However, the grouping of certain names and the presentation of certain genealogies clearly show that Lévi relied on recent debates about the (Neo-)Templars and their historical origins. In 1818, the Austrian Orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) had published a Latin piece in the *Mines de l'Orient*, called “Mysterium Baphometis revelatum, seu fratres militiae templi, qua Gnostici et quidem Ophiani apostasiae, idoloduliae et impuritatis convicti per ipsa eorum monumenta.” Therein he maintained that the Templars were Gnostics and that they worshipped the Gnostic idol of the Baphomet, thus following a doctrine that he also related to the “Cabala.”⁴³ The study received some attention in France, where it was reviewed in the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* in 1832,⁴⁴ a journal with Neo-Catholic background.⁴⁵ Hammer-Purgstall’s accusation that

⁴² The most extensive study of this is still René Le Forestier, *La franc-maçonnerie templière et occultiste aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris/Louvain: Aubier-Montaigne/Éditions Nauwelaerts, 1970); cf. Pierre Mollier, “Freemasonry and Templarism,” in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Jan A. M. Snoek (London/Boston: Brill, 2014). For a discussion of the contexts that are most relevant for the present argument, see Julian Strube, “Revolution, Illuminismus und Theosophie. Eine Genealogie der ‘häretischen’ Historiographie des frühen französischen Sozialismus und Kommunismus,” *Historische Zeitschrift* (forthcoming).

⁴³ Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, “Mysterium baphometis revelatum, seu fratres militiae templi, qua Gnostici et quidem Ophiani apostasiae, idoloduliae et impuritatis convicti per ipsa eorum monumenta,” in *Mines de l'Orient* (Vienna: Antoine Schmid, 1818), 2. He was convinced that the name Baphomet came from βαφή μητεος, which he translated as “*tinctura* (seu bap-tisma) *Metis*,” i.e. “Baptism of Knowledge.” Referring to inscriptions that served as his archaeological evidence, he concluded: “Huic *baptismati spirituali et tincturae igneae* inserviebant crateres ad pedes idolorum nostrorum exsculpti, et igne repleti, ita ut palam fiat, quomodo ritus ille mysticus administraretur.” See *ibid.*, 16–17. It should be noted that βαφή (washing) was not the term usually applied to denote baptism. However, it was used in alchemical contexts, where the meaning was often symbolically conflated with the act of baptizing. This is why, quite correctly, Hammer-Purgstall chose the translation *tinctura*. Many thanks for this information are due to Dylan Burns.

⁴⁴ *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, (Paris: Au Bureau des Annales de la Philosophie Chrétienne, 1835), 317–319.

⁴⁵ Lévi certainly knew the journal and referred to it in Constant, *Dictionnaire*, 899. References

the historical Knights Templar were worshipping a pagan “idol” in the form of a head had been described by various sources throughout the centuries, but the explosive nature of the notion of the Baphomet can only be understood in light of the more recent quarrels about Neo-Templarism.

The old accusations gained fresh interest when Masonic Neo-Templarism was established in the eighteenth century and, due to its outstanding success, caused much controversy. The Masonic Templar legend was most famously outlined in a writing published in Strasbourg in 1760, which claimed that the prosecuted Templars had fled to Scotland and founded the “Scottish Rite.”⁴⁶ This legend was taken up by Karl Gotthelf von Hund (1722–1776) for his Rectified Scottish Rite and, after 1764, his Rite of Strict Observance.⁴⁷ In what followed, multiple Masonic systems focusing on the Templar legend emerged, especially in Germany, including Johann August von Starck’s (1741–1816) Templar Clerics who like other Neo-Templars claimed to represent a chain of initiates that reached back to late antiquity.⁴⁸ In France, this genealogy was controversially discussed in the 1770s, most notably by the Martinist Ordre des Elus Coëns whose lodge in Lyon, under Jean-Baptiste Willermoz (1730–1824), joined the Strict Observance. However, Willermoz soon turned his back to the Strict Observance and prepared, during the “Convent des Gaules” in 1778, the foundation of his Régime Ecossais Rectifié.⁴⁹ One of the outcomes of those efforts was the foundation of the Chevaliers Bienfaisants de la Cité Sainte, which soon became a major voice in Masonic circles.⁵⁰ The Templar legend would be an ongoing subject of Masonic quarrels in the early 1780s.⁵¹ Apart from these disputes, the “mystically” oriented lodges clashed with their skeptical counterparts at the important Convent of Wilhelmsbad in 1782. The success of the “mystics” spawned a whole genre of literature denouncing the historical accuracy of the Templar legend and attacking the Neo-Templars in

to Hammer-Purgstall were so widespread that he most likely encountered them elsewhere.

⁴⁶ Le Forestier, *Franc-maçonnerie*, 68–70, cf. Gustav Adolf Schiffmann, *Die Entstehung der Rittergrade in der Freimaurerei um die Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Bruno Zechel, 1882), 178–90 and Pierre Mollier, *La chevalerie maçonnique. Franc-maçonnerie, imaginaire chevaleresque et légende templière au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Editions Dervy, 2005), 59–120.

⁴⁷ Le Forestier, *Franc-maçonnerie*, 103–221.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 152–97.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 476–97; Alice Joly, *Un mystique lyonnais et les secrets de la Franc-Maçonnerie, 1730–1824* (Mâcon: Protat Frères, 1938), 105–20.

⁵⁰ Le Forestier, *Franc-maçonnerie*, 498–531. The Chevaliers joined the Grand Orient de France but maintained an affiliation with the Strict Observance, which was now led by Ferdinand von Braunschweig (1721–1792) and Karl von Hessen (1744–1836).

⁵¹ Mollier, *Chevalerie*, 126.

the name of rationality and Enlightenment.⁵² One of the most vocal critics was the publisher and writer Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811), who questioned the authenticity of the Templar legend and the role of the historical Knights Templar.⁵³ In his *Versuch über die Beschuldigungen welche dem Tempelherrenorden gemacht worden, und über dessen Geheimniß* of 1782, which was used by Hammer-Purgstall as a reference,⁵⁴ Nicolai argued against the identification of the mysterious *baffometus* or Baphomet and “Mahomet,” which implied that the Knights Templar had secretly been converted to Islam and were worshipping a kind of “Muslim idol.”⁵⁵ Instead, he was convinced of the “Gnostic” beliefs of the Knights Templar.⁵⁶ Speaking of a “kabbalistisch-gnostische Philosophie,” he explained that Gnosticism had emerged from Kabbalah and represented an erroneous heretical strand that was taken up by the Templars.⁵⁷ In France, these polemics were adopted in several conspiracy theories, most prominently by the anti-Masonic Jesuit Augustin Barruel (1741–1820) in his *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme*, from 1797. Barruel maintained that the French Revolution had been the outcome of a Masonic complot, whose ideology he traced back to the “Kabbalistic Freemasons,” the Templars, the Cathars, the Gnostics, and eventually the Manicheans.⁵⁸

This is only a glimpse into a highly diverse and complex genre of literature, which serves to illustrate how certain historical narratives and chains of equivalences sedimented at the end of the eighteenth century. In early nineteenth-century France, they stimulated a wave of Masonic literature that tried to discuss the history of Freemasonry in a positive, self-referential light. These works include Marcello Reghellini’s *La Maçonnerie considérée comme*

⁵² Ludwig Hammermayer, *Der Wilhelmsbader Freimaurer-Konvent von 1782. Ein Höhe- und Wendepunkt in der Geschichte der deutschen und europäischen Geheimgesellschaften* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1980), esp. 37–43; Le Forestier, *Franc-maçonnerie*, 533–706; Joly, *Mystique*, 147–214.

⁵³ Ludwig Hammermayer, “Illuminaten in Bayern. Zur Geschichte, Fortwirken und Legende des Geheimbundes. Entstehung, System, Wirkung (1776/1785/87),“ in *Der Illuminatenorden (1776–1785/87)*, ed. Helmut Reinalter (Frankfurt am Main et al.: Peter Lang, 1997), 24–28. This resulted in a controversy with Herder which unfolded between March and June 1782 in the *Teutschen Merkur*.

⁵⁴ Hammer-Purgstall, “Mysterium,” 16.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nicolai, *Versuch über die Beschuldigungen welche dem Tempelherrenorden gemacht worden, und über dessen Geheimniß* (Berlin/Stettin 1782), esp. 57–90.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, esp. 89–90: “... daß Übereinstimmung der gnostischen Gebräuche mit den Gebräuchen der Tempelherren unwidersprechlich ist ...”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 91, cf. 117–125.

⁵⁸ Augustin Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme*, 4 vols., vol. 2 (London et al.: L’Imprimerie Française et al., 1797), 396–419.

le résultat des religions égyptienne, juive et chrétienne from 1828, where one can read that “the Baphomet of the Gnostics became the one of the Templars.”⁵⁹ Or François-Timoléon Bègue Clavel’s *Histoire pittoresque de la franc-maçonnerie et des sociétés secrètes anciennes et moderne* from 1843, which referred to Hammer-Purgstall’s discussion of the Baphomet.⁶⁰

With the exception of Barruel’s,⁶¹ none of these works were explicitly cited by Lévi, but it can be assumed that he was familiar with them either directly or indirectly. There is hard evidence for his fascination with the topic in a review of Ragon’s *Orthodoxie maçonnique, suivie de la maçonnerie occulte et de l’initiation hermétique* (1853), which he wrote for the *Revue progressive* in 1853. Jean-Marie Ragon de Bettignies (1781–1862) was a highly influential Freemason with revolutionary and reformist tendencies.⁶² It will be recalled that Lévi had referred to the *maçonnerie occulte* as the heiress of the Templar doctrine, and it is highly remarkable that Ragon employed the term *occultisme* in his work, a year before Lévi was writing his *Dogme*—identifying no one else but Charles Fourier, one of the “fathers” of socialism whose ideas exerted a decisive influence on Lévi in the 1840s, as a representative of *occultisme*.⁶³ It is quite possible that Lévi became aware of the Baphomet from reading Ragon’s *Orthodoxie maçonnique*, although his review contains harsh criticism that reveals

⁵⁹ Marcello Reghellini, *La Maçonnerie considérée comme le résultat des religions égyptienne, juive et chrétienne*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Bruxelles: H. Tarlier, 1829), 289–90, cf. 444–46.

⁶⁰ François-Timoléon Bègue Clavel, *Histoire pittoresque de la franc-maçonnerie et des sociétés secrètes anciennes et modernes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Pagnerre, 1843), 355.

⁶¹ Alphonse-Louis Constant, “Orthodoxie maçonnique, suivie de la maçonnerie occulte et de l’initiation hermétique, par J.-M. Ragon,” in *Revue progressive* (Paris/London/Brüssel: Au Bureau de la Revue/Barthés et Lowell/M. Périchon, 1853), 131.

⁶² A comprehensive study of this remarkable personality remains to be written. See, however, Claude Rétat, “Jean-Marie Ragon. Ou: Qu’est-ce qu’un Maçon Instruit?,” *Renaissance Traditionnelle* 143/144 (2005); André Combes, *Histoire de la franc-maçonnerie au XIX^e siècle*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 1998), 121–22; Jean-Pierre Laurant, *L’ésotérisme chrétien en France au XIX^e siècle* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1992), 101; Le Forestier, *Franc-maçonnerie*, 964–65 and Strube, *Sozialismus*, esp. 445–46. Ragon’s “Trinosophes” became a gathering point for Freemasons who adhered to the ideals of the French Revolution, including Nicolas Desétanges, who had participated in the Storming of the Bastille, and Jean-Baptiste Chemin-Dupontès, the old “pope” of Théophilanthropie. For a while, Ragon was a member of Fabré-Palaprat’s Ordre du Temple and “Vicaire primatial” of the Eglise catholique française of the Abbé Châtel.

⁶³ Jean-Marie Ragon, *Maçonnerie occulte suivie de l’initiation hermétique* (Paris: Dentu, 1853), 170. In the second half of the 1840s, Lévi openly identified as a Fourierist, wrote for the leading Fourierist newspaper, *La démocratie pacifique*, and published his book in the Librairie phalanstérienne, the main Fourierist publisher.

that he had already developed some opinions of his own.⁶⁴ It is no surprise that Lévi criticized Ragon's anti-Christian attitude and his "materialism," but at the same time he lauded the *Orthodoxie maçonnique* as a "great project" that attempted to give Freemasonry a coherent dogma in the form of an "occult philosophy." However, Lévi regarded the "protestant" Freemasons with outspoken suspicion and even disdain. He rejected their "puerile rites" and declared that the "establishment of a new world" would not be achieved "by simple workers, and certainly not by masons"—a strikingly condescending remark.⁶⁵ It is curious that Lévi expressed disappointment that he was not able to learn more from Ragon about "the ancient initiations and the gatherings of the middle ages," as well as about "the traditional goat of the Sabbath, the Bophomet [sic] of the Templars" and the "philosophical and divine meaning of these monstrous allegories."⁶⁶ This criticism was not entirely fair, as Ragon did, as a matter of fact, identify the "matter of the alchemists" with, among others, the Goat of Mendes, Pan, Kabbalistic doctrines, and—perhaps most notably—with "magnétisme spécifique."⁶⁷ This equation is practically identical to Lévi's description of the Baphomet, and it is very likely that this is no coincidence. That being said, it must be noted that Ragon was himself only reproducing tropes that were omnipresent in Masonic and anti-Masonic writings, as well as the vast literature they had inspired since the second half of the eighteenth century.

Works about the occult sciences and magic

Lévi frequently referred to contemporary compendia of the fashionable *sciences occultes*, a catch-all phrase for topics such as magic, alchemy, astrology, and so on.⁶⁸ Interestingly, Lévi's initial remarks about the *sciences occultes* were highly polemical. In 1853, he published a scathing article about "Les prétendues sciences occultes, ou la folie artificielle et les manœuvres qui la produisent" in the *Revue*

⁶⁴ Constant, "Orthodoxie," 132–34. Lévi mentioned some works and names that indicate his reading at the time. He also criticized Ragon, rather vaguely, for knowing nothing about the Tarot. For a more detailed analysis, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 445–50.

⁶⁵ Constant, "Orthodoxie," 137. For Lévi's later relationship with Freemasonry, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 581–82, cf. 482–88.

⁶⁶ Constant, "Orthodoxie," 134–35.

⁶⁷ Ragon, *Maçonnerie*, 220, 154–55, 95. In another text from 1841, Ragon had written: "Le maillet est aussi devenu la croix tronquée gnostique ou baphométrique." See *Cours philosophique et interprétatif des initiations anciennes et modernes* (Paris: Berlandier, 1841), 175.

⁶⁸ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 230–39.

progressive. Therein he decried them as “intellectual aristocracy, without hierarchy and reason,” as “charlatanism,” and as “scientific atheism.”⁶⁹ However, it becomes clear that he directed his rant against the vogue of the *tables tournantes*, which he strongly opposed, as well as against the “street sibyls,” implying that he believed he had discovered a superior form of magical knowledge that was contained in the Tarot.⁷⁰ This suggests that Lévi had started to learn about magic and the Tarot at that time, a process that cannot be investigated in more detail at this point.⁷¹ But the sources to which he referred enable us to learn more about his development of the Baphomet motif.

His first discussion of the *sciences occultes* can be found in the somewhat puzzling *Dictionnaire de littérature chrétienne* from 1851, where he made extensive use of Ferdinand Denis’ *Tableau historique, analytique et critique des sciences occultes* (1830).⁷² From this popular work he could learn that the Templars, influenced by Gnostic ideas, were practicing the *sciences occultes* and handed down the doctrines related to them.⁷³ In a similar work, Jacques-Albin-Simon Collin de Plancy’s *Dictionnaire infernal* (1844), which was reprinted as *Dictionnaire des sciences occultes* (1846) in the same series that contained Lévi’s *Dictionnaire*, the entry “Goat” (*bouc*) discusses its identification in Egypt with Pan, as well as with Azazel and the Sabbatical Goat.⁷⁴ Another “classic” that Lévi worked with was Jules Garinet’s *Histoire de la magie en France* (1818), which contains a passage about the trial of the Templars.⁷⁵ It appears that Lévi used those compendia from 1851 onwards to gather knowledge about these topics, which would surface in his articles for the *Revue philosophique et religieuses* and eventually in his monographs about magic.

Gnosticism

It has become clear by now that the Templars were commonly regarded as the successors of the ancient Gnostics. In this light, Lévi’s genealogy of “esoteric

⁶⁹ Alphonse-Louis Constant, “Les prétendues sciences occultes, ou la folie artificielle et les manœuvres qui la produisent,” in *Revue progressive* (Paris/London/Brüssel: Au Bureau de la Revue/Barthés et Lowell/M. Périchon, 1853), 235–37.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 240–42.

⁷¹ See Strube, *Sozialismus*.

⁷² For a detailed analysis, see *ibid.*, 394–416.

⁷³ Ferdinand Denis, *Tableau historique, analytique et critique des sciences occultes* (Paris: Bureau de l’Encyclopédie portative/Bachelier, 1830), 11, 181–82.

⁷⁴ Jacques Albin Simon Collin de Plancy, *Dictionnaire infernal*, 3rd ed. (Paris/Lyon: Paul Mellier/Guyot, 1844), 97–98. Lévi refers to this work in *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 232.

⁷⁵ Jules Garinet, *Histoire de la magie en France* (Paris: Foulon et Compagnie, 1818), 77–80. This work is also a source for later occultists, e.g. Guäita, *Clef*, 282–85.

Christianity” appears a lot less inventive than it might have at the beginning of this section. An initial occupation with the history of the Gnostics is tangible in the *Dictionnaire* of 1851, where Lévi discussed the environment of the late antique School of Alexandria. He maintained that the early Christians had been forced by their pagan adversaries to adopt “a kind of Christian esotericism” (*ésotérisme chrétien*). At this point, he already laid a strong emphasis on the Apocalypse of John, to which he referred as “the book of initiation of the true Gnostics.”⁷⁶ In his later monographs, he reiterated his conviction that the Gnostics had been “Christian Kabbalists” following John, but he explained that early on a current of “false Gnostics” emerged, which was responsible for the loss of the Kabbalistic keys.⁷⁷ This corrupted Gnosticism resulted, like Arianism and Manicheism, from a “misunderstood Kabbalah” and was based on “materialistic and pantheistic” errors.⁷⁸ It is significant that Lévi referred to the *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques* (1847) by the respected scholar Adolphe Franck (1810–1893) for his identification of Gnosticism and Kabbalah.⁷⁹ The respective entry “Kabbale” was Lévi’s first evident source for the topic of Kabbalah.⁸⁰ This is especially interesting because Franck emphasized the translation of *Kabbale* as *tradition*—a tradition that included Gnosticism, the School of Alexandria, “Indian mysticism,” and the theosophy of Jakob Böhme.

Yet, more importantly, Lévi’s *Dictionnaire* referred to the authority on the history of Gnosticism, Jacques Matter (1791–1864).⁸¹ It is well-known that Matter appears to have been the first author to have used the word *ésotérisme* in the French language,⁸² and indeed Lévi employed it in the context of his work. The Alsatian scholar had published a widely acknowledged *Essai historique sur l’école d’Alexandrie* in 1820, which was succeeded in 1828 by a *Histoire critique du gnosticisme*. In the second volume of this work, Matter used the term *ésotérisme* to characterize the doctrines of the Pythagoreans and the Gnostics.⁸³ In 1840,

⁷⁶ Constant, *Dictionnaire*, 83, cf. 635.

⁷⁷ Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 148; *Histoire*, 217.

⁷⁸ *Histoire*, 222; cf. 68–70, where the errors of the Gnostics are attributed to the influence of “the false Kabbalah of India.”

⁷⁹ Constant, *Dictionnaire*, 126.

⁸⁰ Adolphe Franck, *Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques*, vol. 3 (Paris: L. Hachette, 1847), 382–92. Lévi referred to a passage on p. 384. Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Beginnings of Occultist Kabbalah. Adolphe Franck and Eliphas Lévi,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity. Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 118; Hanegraaff suspected that Lévi might have been familiar with Franck’s scholarship.

⁸¹ Constant, *Dictionnaire*, 878–95.

⁸² Laurant, *Esotérisme*, 7–13.

⁸³ Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du gnosticisme et de son influence sur les sectes religieuses et*

a revised and considerably expanded version of the *Essai* appeared as *Histoire de l'école d'Alexandrie*. It contains the thesis that the merging of Christian and pagan doctrines lay at the root of the new Gnostic school, which propagated an emanationist doctrine of creation in the Jewish-Platonic tradition of Philo that was opposed to the Christian *creatio ex nihilo*—two rival traditions whose struggle has continued well into the present day.⁸⁴ Matter was deeply fascinated by this “mystical” religious tradition. He had evident contacts to the High Degree Masonry in Strasbourg and sustained contacts with leading Martinists.⁸⁵ He was married to the daughter of Friedrich Rudolf Salzmann (1749–1821, also Salzmann), a friend of Willermoz and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin.⁸⁶ Over the years, he published several works about Saint-Martin, Swedenborg and the history of mysticism. This shows that his interest in the School of Alexandria was not motivated by mere scholarly curiosity but a determination to unveil the history of an authentic religious tradition that would provide the path to the final religion of the future.⁸⁷ This idea mirrored contemporary discourses about the nature of a “true” religion, which would resurface in the writings of Eliphas Lévi.

Matter often emphasized the “analogy between the Kabbalah and Gnosticism.” Remarkably, he also did so with regard to the emblems, diagrams and figures of the Kabbalistic and Gnostic traditions, for which he provided a separate volume of plates.⁸⁸ He based these analogies especially on the *Kabbala Denudata*, the *Sefer Jezirah*, and the *Zohar*—which would soon function as main sources for Lévi.⁸⁹ In his *Histoire critique du gnosticisme* he also expounded

philosophiques des six premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Paris: F.-G. Levraut, 1828), 83, 489. He maintained that the early Christians had been opposed to the pagan differentiation between an *ésotérique* and an *exotérique* religion, see *ibid.*, 1: 13–14.

⁸⁴ *Histoire*, 1, preface and introduction, esp. 29–32, 291–94, 305–11, 52–53. For more details, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 118–21, 398–400 and “Socialism and Esotericism in July Monarchy France,” *History of Religions* (forthcoming).

⁸⁵ Joly, *Mystique*, 105. Saint-Martin introduced him to the works of Böhme: see Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 73. It has been argued that his understanding of emanation was based on Martines des Pasqually: Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 335–36.

⁸⁶ Laurant, *Esotérisme*, 42; cf. Le Forestier, *Franç-maçonnerie*, 419f., 516–19, 94f., 651–56, 803–10, 909–12 and Jules Keller, *Le théosophe alsacien Frédéric-Rodolphe Salzmann et les milieux spirituels de son temps. Contribution à l'étude de l'illumination et du mysticisme à la fin du XVIIIe et au début du XIXe siècle*, 2 vols., Europäische Hochschulschriften (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 1985).

⁸⁷ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 120–21.

⁸⁸ Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du gnosticisme: Planches* (Paris: F.-G. Levraut, 1828), 7.

⁸⁹ *Histoire*, 1, 104. In the same footnote, those traditions are also linked to India, because “Tout est lié dans l'antique Asie...”

analogies between the god of Mendes, its emblem of a goat, and the god Pan.⁹⁰ It is tantalizing to imagine Lévi scanning through the volume of plates provided by Matter and comparing “Gnostic” and “Kabbalistic” iconographies. What is for sure is that he was familiar with contemporary debates about the origins of Christianity and a supposed schism between an “esoteric,” “Gnostic” Christian current and the established doctrine of the Church.

Socialism

The political character of Lévi’s genealogy has already been discussed at the outset. It should be recalled that Lévi did not only have a radical socialist past, but that his ideas from the 1840s formed the basis for the development of his “occultism” from the 1850s forward. From today’s perspective, it might appear strange that Lévi’s socialist background should be essential for his occultist narrative, but a brief look at the historiographies of July Monarchy socialism will support this point. Literally every French study of socialism that appeared between the 1830s and early 1850s depicted the socialists as the heirs of a heretical tradition that included the theosophists of the eighteenth century, medieval groups such as the Templars and the Cathars, and eventually the very same protagonists of the School of Alexandria, most notably the Gnostics, that were discussed above. These studies included Louis Reybaud’s pioneering *Etudes sur les réformateurs contemporains ou socialistes modernes* (1840),⁹¹ Alfred Sudre’s *Histoire du communisme ou Réfutation historique des utopies socialistes* (1848), Adolphe Franck’s *Le communisme jugé par l’histoire* (1848), and Jean Joseph Thonissen’s *Le socialisme depuis l’antiquité jusqu’à la constitution française du 14 janvier 1852* (1852). Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow for a discussion of the reasons for these depictions.⁹² But it must be noted that these studies, as well as the (self-)perceptions of socialists, were inherently intertwined with the questions of the authenticity of “true” religion and the origins of Christianity. In those debates, the School of Alexandria came to be a focal point, to the degree that Thonissen’s study, for example, almost identically copied the “*ésotérique vs. exotérique*” passage from Matter’s *Histoire critique du gnosticisme* in order to define the origins of socialism.⁹³ This conflation

⁹⁰ Ibid., 2: 12.

⁹¹ Esp. Louis Reybaud, *Etudes sur les réformateurs contemporains ou socialistes modernes* (Paris: Guillaumin et Compagnie, 1840), 132–33; cf. “Des idées et des sectes communistes,” in *Revue des deux mondes* (Paris: Au Bureau de la Revue des deux mondes, 1842), esp. 12–18.

⁹² See Strube, “Socialism and Esotericism,” and *Sozialismus*, 97–147.

⁹³ Compare Jean Joseph Thonissen, *Le socialisme depuis l’antiquité jusqu’à la constitution française du 14 janvier 1852*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Louvain/Paris: Vanlinthout et Compagnie/Sagnier et Bray, 1852), 151, and Matter, *Histoire*, 1, 13–14.

of revolutionary currents, socialism, Gnosticism, Kabbalah, magic, the *sciences occultes*, and related topoi reaches back to the genre of eighteenth-century historiographies by authors such as Barruel and Nicolai.⁹⁴

As he was deeply involved in socialist as well as in Romantic circles, where such narratives were picked up with great enthusiasm, Lévi was certainly familiar with these historiographies. While some of the sources discussed previously are more relevant for an understanding of the general context of certain motifs regarding the Templars, the Baphomet, and their supposed Gnostic origins, these narratives about the history of socialism can be situated in Lévi's immediate proximity. This becomes particularly evident from the fact that his best friend and closest political comrade, Alphonse Esquiros (1812–1876), published one of the most fascinating versions of a “heretical historiography” of socialism, the *Histoire des Montagnards* from 1847.⁹⁵ At this time, Constant and Esquiros lived through their most radical phases. They founded, in the revolutionary year of 1848, one of the most notorious revolutionary clubs, the Club de la Montagne.⁹⁶ Adhering “au socialisme le plus radical,” as they proudly proclaimed,⁹⁷ they represented the Montagnard faction, which received their name from their upper ranks in the National Assembly and would today be referred to as the Extreme Left. Thus, when Esquiros wrote his *Histoire*, he attempted to establish the genealogy of his own ideology and that of his political comrades. According to Esquiros, the superior “science” that was at the root of political radicalism originated with Jesus Christ (the first revolutionary) and was handed down in the form of the *sciences occultes*: “astrology, alchemy, magic,” which “concealed the opposition of the human spirit during the centuries of darkness: especially the religious opposition, followed by the opposition against monarchy.”⁹⁸ The book of the Kabbalists, Esquiros went on, had to be written in an encrypted language to avoid prosecution by the authorities. Although the medieval magicians were not usually reformers in the modern sense, they were dissidents whose practices betrayed a hatred of the established powers.⁹⁹ The French Revolution was an “explosion” of those

⁹⁴ Strube, “Revolution, Illuminismus und Theosophie.”

⁹⁵ *Sozialismus*, 408–11. For more details about Esquiros, see Jacques P. van den Linden, *Alphonse Esquiros. De la bohème romantique à la république sociale* (Heerlen/Paris: Winants/Nizet, 1948) and Anthony Zielonka, *Alphonse Esquiros (1812–1876): A Study of his Works* (Paris/Genève: Champion/Slatkine, 1985).

⁹⁶ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 370–75.

⁹⁷ *Le Tribun du Peuple*, no. 3, March 23, 1848.

⁹⁸ Alphonse Esquiros, *Histoire des Montagnards* (Paris: Victor Lecou, 1847), 26–27.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

tendencies, which had passed on from the Kabbalah to the Freemasons, and from there to the revolutionary clubs.¹⁰⁰ This fascinating genealogy is the one which was closest to Lévi, but it was just one among a number of others.

These genealogies could also be found in the Socialist-Romantic literature that Lévi had been highly enthusiastic about since the late 1830s, most prominently George Sand's *Spiridion* (1839), whose reading he described in 1841 as a life-altering experience.¹⁰¹ It is no wonder then, that his notorious *Bible de la liberté* from 1841, which earned him a prison sentence and a hefty fine, did reflect “traditionalist” ideas that are almost identical to his later occultist narrative. For example, he described a tradition reaching from Moses, Enoch, Hermes, Orpheus, Socrates, Pythagoras, and Plato, among others, to Jesus Christ and finally to the revolutionary heretics who succeeded him.¹⁰² He expounded the thesis of a primitive and universal revelation that proved the identity of the Abrahamic, Greco-Roman, and Indian religions, which would soon be joined in universal unity.¹⁰³ In his *Doctrines religieuses et sociales* from 1841, he stressed that the Bible was written in “figures,” “symbols,” and “images.” It could only be decrypted with the key of the Apocalypse of John, which contained the “eternal revelation” and “the gospel in all its purity.”¹⁰⁴ Written at a time when Christianity had been outlawed, it could only be understood by *élus*, chosen ones.¹⁰⁵ Using a socialist, Saint-Simonian terminology, Lévi maintained that *hommes d'élite*—inspired or holy men; prophets—had communicated divine truths to generations of seekers who wrote them down in books “which are venerated by the vulgar without comprehending them,” especially

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 37–39. It may be noted that a later edition of the *Histoire*, from 1875, did not contain any relativizing and critical remarks about magicians, Freemasons, etc., but depicted them in a very enthusiastic light. Also, the Kabbalah receives significantly more attention. At one point, it is even referred to as a “Counter-Church”: “Elle [la science] se fit société secrète et prit le nom de cabale. La cabale était une contre-Eglise” (*Histoire des Montagnards*, Œuvres d'Alphonse Esquiros (Paris: Librairie de la Renaissance, 1875), 18).

¹⁰¹ Alphonse-Louis Constant, *L'Assomption de la femme ou Le livre de l'amour* (Paris: La Gallois, 1841), XIX. In this passage, Lévi also referred to his reading of “the ancient Gnostics.” For Lévi's reception of the *Spiridion* and its content, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 223–27. For a similar account by Gérard de Nerval, a fellow *romantique* from Lévi's milieu, see *ibid.*, 411–14.

¹⁰² Alphonse-Louis Constant, *La Bible de la Liberté* (Paris: Le Gallois, 1841), 88.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 93. The passage contains several names that would be central to the later occultist writings, such as the Indian “Trimourti.”

¹⁰⁴ *Doctrines religieuses et sociales* (Paris: Le Gallois, 1841), 65–66.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 60. In contemporary times it was particularly the poet who could decipher it, as Jesus had been a poet himself, and the Apocalypse a poem: *ibid.*, 66; cf. *Bible*, 77–81.

the Apocalypse of John.¹⁰⁶ This demonstrates that Lévi had articulated his idea of a tradition of true divine knowledge that was only understandable for “initiates” as early as his very first radical writings. After further developing this idea during the 1840s, most notably in his *Livre des larmes* of 1845 and his *Testament de la liberté* of 1848, it was only a relatively small step to the occultist narrative outlined in the beginning of this section.

In contrast to his friends, in the 1840s Lévi’s writings do not reveal any concern for the occult sciences, magic, or Kabbalah. Lévi only took active interest in those matters after 1848. However, his radical socialist writings do contain a number of ideas that would later resurface in his occultist oeuvre, most specifically in the concept of the Baphomet. Perhaps most fundamental among these were his concept of “universal harmony”—a socialist *association universelle*—and the notion of a *science universelle* that he believed to have found in the teachings of Lamennais, Swedenborg, and Fourier.¹⁰⁷ This *science universelle* preconfigured much of his later concept of “magic.” His Fourierist understanding of “harmony” and the equilibrium necessary to establish it would be of central importance to his Baphomet. The language of harmony, analogies, and correspondences was commonplace not only in Fourierist parlance, but also in the socialism-infused Romanticism of Lévi’s fellow *petits romantiques*.¹⁰⁸

Other topics essential to the radical socialist writings were the figure of Lucifer and the notion of the redemption of Satan, which were widely popular in Romantic circles during the 1830s and 1840s.¹⁰⁹ Artists such as Balzac, Hugo, Lamartine, Michelet, Alexandre Soumet, and George Sand wrote about Lucifer and Satan as revolutionary and tragic figures, symbolizing the human quest for freedom and redemption.¹¹⁰ Lévi was personally acquainted with some of these

¹⁰⁶ *Doctrines*, 10–11. See also *La mère de Dieu. Épopée religieuse et humanitaire* (Paris: Charles Gosselin, 1844), esp. 190–91 and *Le Livre des Larmes ou Le Christ Consolateur. Essai de conciliation entre l’Église catholique et la philosophie moderne* (Paris: Paulier, 1845), 193–94: “Dès mon adolescence je lisais l’Apocalypse avec une avidité presque fébrile.”

¹⁰⁷ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 316–51.

¹⁰⁸ Lévi’s role as a *petit romantique* was especially highlighted by Frank Paul Bowman, *Eliphas Lévi, visionnaire romantique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), 5–60.

¹⁰⁹ Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014), 113–60; Luijk, “Satan,” 83–173.

¹¹⁰ Max Milner, *Le diable dans la littérature française, de Cozzotte à Baudelaire, 1772–1861*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: J. Corti, 1960), 164–72, 516–622; *ibid.*, 2: 117–56, 358–422; Léon Cellier, *L’épopée romantique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), 221–45; Ursula Müller, “Die Gestalt Lucifers in der Dichtung vom Barock bis zur Romantik” (Dissertation, Universität Gießen, 1940), 53–69; Frank Paul Bowman, *Le Christ des barricades* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987), 266; Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 137–38; Luijk, “Satan,” 140–42.

authors, including other *romantiques* such as Théophile Gautier and Gérard de Nerval, who were friends and collaborators of Esquiros.¹¹¹ It does not come as a surprise, then, that he was highly enthusiastic about their works and deeply influenced by them.¹¹² In his *Bible de la liberté*, he described Lucifer as the “angel of liberty” who stood for the emancipation of human “intelligence.” Only “centuries of ignorance” had falsely turned him into the “prince of demons.” Far from being an evil entity, he would eventually be rehabilitated and unified with God through his revolutionary striving for freedom and science.¹¹³ This understanding of Lucifer appears almost identically in Lévi’s occultist writings, where he quoted extensively from his publications from the 1840s, most notably the *Bible* and the *Testament*. As will be seen in section 4, this was not only decisive for the creation of his Baphomet, but it would also be central to his polemics against Catholic writers.

It will be recalled that Lévi’s attitude towards “pantheism” was very negative. His description of the Baphomet as a “pantheistic figure” and a “Panthée” calls for clarification. In his first socialist writings, Lévi openly identified as a “pantheist.”¹¹⁴ This does not come as a surprise, as “pantheism” was a term widely used to decry recent philosophical and religious tendencies, including the contemporary socialist currents to which Lévi adhered. Henry Maret (1837–1881), for example, a former disciple of Lamennais and one of the most distinguished Catholic apologists, saw the socialist school of the Saint-Simonians as the successors of a tradition that had originated in India before spreading to Egypt and Chaldea and then manifesting in the Greek Mysteries, the doctrine of Pythagoras, and the School of Alexandria with its Gnostic and Neoplatonist protagonists. From there, it started a tradition of erroneous “mysticism” that had recently manifested in eighteenth-century philosophy, most importantly German Idealism, and finally in contemporary socialist currents.¹¹⁵ In light of Lévi’s later writings, it is also noteworthy that the Kabbalah featured as an example of “pantheism” in contemporary debates, which Lévi was certainly aware of.¹¹⁶ Apart from this (Neo-)Catholic context,

¹¹¹ For Gautier’s treatment of Satan, see Milner, *Diable*, 2, 173–77; cf. *Ibid.*, 1: 522–31. For Nerval, see *ibid.*, 2: 274–309; cf. *Ibid.*, 1: 583–94.

¹¹² Strube, *Sozialismus*, 236–39; cf. Luijk, “Satan,” 154.

¹¹³ Constant, *Bible*, 17–19. Cf. Milner, *Diable*, 2, 249–51, where the parallels to Lamennais and Sand are highlighted. Also see the striking passage in Constant, *Mère*, 265.

¹¹⁴ E.g., *Assomption*, XI.

¹¹⁵ Henry Maret, *Essai sur le panthéisme dans les sociétés modernes* (Paris: Sapia, 1840), 97–111.

¹¹⁶ This is especially the controversy between Paul Drach (1791–1865) and Adolphe Franck. See François Laplanche, *La Bible en France entre mythe et critique, XVIe–XIXe siècle* (Paris: Albin

the publications of Lévi most notably reflected the Romantic tendencies of July Monarchy socialism, which led critics to identify the socialist reformers as “modern pantheists.” Indeed, one of his most impressive works from this period, *La Mère de Dieu* (1844), is profoundly marked by a mystical pantheism.¹¹⁷ In his *Livre des larmes* of 1845, however, Lévi had turned to a Catholic traditionalism and rationalism propagated by Joseph de Maistre.¹¹⁸ He came to denounce pantheism as erroneous and emphasized the need for Catholic authority and hierarchy.¹¹⁹ This stance would harden in the following years. Most likely very aware of his “pantheistic” past, he did not merely abandon his old beliefs. As in so many other respects, he was convinced that he had come to understand their “true” meaning, regarding himself as superior to others, be they rival socialists or Catholics, in his quest to establish “true” socialism and “true” Catholicism. This explains the ambiguousness of his language about “pantheism.” It has to be seen within the changing dialectic between “true” and “false” doctrines that determined his historical narrative from the 1840s on.

One of the most striking aspects of the Baphomet is its androgynous form. Indeed, androgyny is one of the most central themes in Lévi’s writings from the 1840s. In his *Bible*, as well as another publication from 1841 entitled *L’assomption de la femme*, Lévi envisioned the redemption of humankind and establishment of the *association universelle* after the second coming of Christ, the rehabilitation of Lucifer, and the emancipation of woman. He regarded the emancipation of woman as a prerequisite for the progress of society—a widespread notion in socialist circles—but she was also the one who, in the personification of Mary, redeemed humanity by her Christ-like suffering and would eventually rehabilitate Lucifer, heralding the final universal synthesis.¹²⁰

Michel, 1994), 124–25, and Strube, *Sozialismus*, 404–05. Gougenot des Mousseaux, who was known for his notoriously anti-Semitic stance, leveled similar accusations against the Kabbalah.

¹¹⁷ See esp. Constant, *Mère*, 273, 360. Cf. Paul Bénichou, *Romantismes français*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 865–66. Léon Cellier viewed this work as one of the most remarkable products of the period, see his *Épopée romantique*, 209–20.

¹¹⁸ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 308–15.

¹¹⁹ This was no renunciation of his socialist ideas, as the reception of de Maistre, including his notion of hierarchy and authority, had been central to the development of French socialism, especially Saint-Simonism and later Fourierist variants. See “Socialist Religion,” 367–68; “Neues Christentum,” 148–49.

¹²⁰ Lévi equaled the suffering of suppressed women to that of Christ, a notion that he probably adopted from his friend Esquiros. For a study of July Monarchy socialist feminism, including the “Abbé Constant” as an example, see Naomi Judith Andrews, *Socialism’s Muse: Gender in the Intellectual Landscape of French Romantic Socialism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006) and “‘La Mère Humanité’: Femininity in the Romantic Socialism of Pierre Leroux and the Abbé A.-L.

Quite remarkably, this synthesis would bring forth a union not only of humanity and God but also of man and woman: “The two sexes will be one, according to the word of Christ; the great androgyne will be created, humanity will be woman and man.”¹²¹ In *Mère*, Lévi described a “new Earth” in the form of the “universal Church”: “This is the palace of the husband and the wife; here lives pure and celestial love; here exists no distinction between the ranks and the sexes anymore: God alone is all in all.”¹²² Although androgyny used to be a typical motif in Romantic literature, and although some of the ideas expressed by Lévi can be traced back directly to his friend and mentor Simon Ganneau—an eccentric socialist known as the “Mapah”¹²³—the eclectic vision formulated in his 1840s writings stands out as one of the most remarkable products of Romantic socialism. Given the prominence of androgyny in this vision, it is no surprise that the Baphomet, whom Lévi referred to as “the great androgyne,” represents a fusion of the sexes. It has to be seen as a symbol of the realization of the final universal synthesis, which had been Lévi’s ultimate goal since he began to publish his radical ideas as the notorious Abbé Constant.

The political dimension of these ideas can hardly be overestimated. It did not disappear in Lévi’s occultist writings. More prominently than ever before, he began to propagate his idea of an élite of initiates that was supposed to lead humanity to emancipation. He had already intensified this notion in his *Testament de la liberté*, but the disastrous aftermath of the February Revolution of 1848, which brought forth the irreversible demise of July Monarchy socialism, robbed him of his belief in the ability of “the masses” to emancipate themselves.¹²⁴ However, he did not break with his former beliefs but modified them. Echoing his earlier writings, Lévi wrote in *La clef des grands mystères* that the *hommes d’élite* would be responsible for the administration of “the interests and goods of the universal family. Then, according to the promise of the Gospel, there will only be one flock and one shepherd [i.e., God].”¹²⁵ He repeatedly differentiated between the “chosen ones” and the “masses,” but emphasized that it was the destiny of man to “create oneself” and gain freedom from enslavement.¹²⁶ It was the task of the people to “initiate themselves,” and as soon as their leaders would become wise, “the paths to emancipation will be open for everyone, to personal, successive,

Constant,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 4 (2002).

¹²¹ Constant, *Assomption*, 78–79.

¹²² *Mère*, 279.

¹²³ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 256–68.

¹²⁴ “Socialist Religion,” 369–70, 78; cf. *Sozialismus*, 512–22.

¹²⁵ Lévi, *Clef*, 64.

¹²⁶ *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 140f., *Histoire*, 47f., *Clef*, 20, 290.

progressive emancipation, by which all those following their vocation will be able, through their efforts, to achieve the rank of the chosen ones.”¹²⁷ This is the fundamental idea behind Lévi’s occultism. Its core elements are represented by the Baphomet. This is nowhere more obvious than in the last lines of the chapter “Le Baphomet” in the posthumous *Livre des splendeurs*. In a dramatic conclusion, Lévi heralded the establishment of the final universal religion on Earth in an enthusiastic socialist tenor: “The association of all interests, / The federation of all people, / The alliance of all cults, / And universal solidarity.”¹²⁸

4. Polemics against Catholics and Spiritists

The historical narrative underlying Lévi’s Baphomet has now been discussed, and it has been shown which main sources he used to develop it. A comprehensive understanding of its meaning, however, requires a closer look at the 1850s, when Lévi engaged in polemics with different opponents in order to defend his magical doctrine and distance himself from others. It has already been indicated that he was part of a generation of disillusioned socialists who were excited by the vogue of the *tables tournantes* in 1853, which eventually led to the emergence of the French Spiritist movement.¹²⁹ Unlike many other socialists, he took a decidedly hostile stance towards the new phenomena, as his condescending article about the “folly” of the “*prétendues sciences occultes*” has illustrated. His sense of superiority can be understood against two backgrounds: first, he had gathered his knowledge about the workings of magic in a specific context which can be referred to as “spiritualistic magnetism”; second, as a “true” Catholic he was much less concerned about his magnetistic or Spiritist opponents than about prominent Catholic writers who occupied themselves with spirit phenomena.

Magnetism and Spiritism

Lévi’s notion of the Astral Light (*lumière astrale*) is perhaps the best-known aspect of his magical theory. Early recipients, such as Blavatsky, were mainly interested in this concept, and, as noted above, the Baphomet is in several ways an embodiment of the Astral Light. Contrary to occultist perspectives on the Astral Light, and contrary to recent scholarship, it must be stressed that

¹²⁷ *Histoire*, 558.

¹²⁸ *Le livre des splendeurs, contenant le soleil judaïque, la gloire chrétienne et l'étoile flamboyante, études sur les origines de la cabale, avec des recherches sur les mystères de la francmaçonnerie, suivies de la profession de foi et des éléments de cabale* (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 113.

¹²⁹ Strube, “Socialist Religion,” 373–74.

Lévi did not rely on ancient, medieval, or even early modern sources when he developed this theory.¹³⁰ He pointed out himself that he had borrowed the notion from “the school of Pasqualis Martinez,” i.e. Martinism.¹³¹ However, his actual sources came not from the late eighteenth century but from the 1850s. Most likely, he discovered the notion in a publication from 1852, *La magie dévoilée* by Jean Du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881), which Lévi explicitly named as a source.¹³² He agreed with Du Potet’s conviction that the Astral Light denoted an *agent magique* that had been known to the Kabbalists, the Chaldean mages, the alchemists, and the Gnostics.¹³³ As a *médiateur plastique*, it was the force behind magnetism and consequently the ultimate cause of magical operations.¹³⁴ Lévi took great pains to distinguish this theory from other magnetistic approaches, and especially from somnambulism—hence his ongoing polemics against “dabblers.” In his view, the true practitioner of magic needed two fundamental qualifications: first, a natural disposition and individual training of the “will,” and second, an “initiation.”

Although the Astral Light was a “blind mechanism” that worked “mathematically” and followed immutable laws,¹³⁵ it was the will (*volonté*) of the magician that was needed to control it, and the exercise of this will required

¹³⁰ See Bernd-Christian Otto, *Magie. Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 520–21, where the Astral Light is traced from Agrippa and Paracelsus to Ficino; cf. “A (Catholic) ‘Magician’ Historicizes ‘Magic’: Eliphas Lévi’s *Histoire de la Magie*,” in *History and Religion: Writing a Religious Past*, ed. Bernd-Christian Otto, Susanne Rau, and Jörg Rüpke (Berlin: De Gruyter), 436.

¹³¹ Lévi, *Clef*, 217.

¹³² *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 75. The work contained a passage from the *Philosophie divine* by the Martinist Jean-Philippe Dutoit-Membrini (1721–1792), which was copied by Lévi and put in the very same context. Cf. Jules Du Potet de Sevennoy, *La magie dévoilée ou principes de science occulte* (Paris: Pommeret et Moreau, 1852), 137 and Jean-Philippe Dutoit-Membrini, *La philosophie divine appliquée aux lumières naturelle, magique, astrale, surnaturelle, céleste et divine*, vol. 1 (n.p., 1793), 35–36: “Cet esprit astral, ou feu ou lumière astrale, qui est le plus haut degré de la lumière des esprits, est supérieur toutefois à ce qu’on appelle l’esprit de la nature; et il en fait la force, les vertus et les rapports.” For more about Dutoit-Membrini, see Auguste Viatte, *Les sources occultes du romantisme. Illuminisme, Théosophie 1770–1820*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Champion, 1928), 116–19. Also see Baier, *Méditation*, 1, 267–70, who recognized Du Potet’s importance to Lévi’s magical theory.

¹³³ Lévi, *Clef*, 217–18; *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 205. Cf. *Ibid.*, 2: 48: “Scientifiquement on peut apprécier les diverses manifestations du mouvement universel par les phénomènes électriques ou magnétiques. Que les physiciens cherchent et découvrent : les cabalistes expliqueront les découvertes de la science.”

¹³⁴ *Clef*, 113–14.

¹³⁵ *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 185; *Histoire*, 18–19.

intensive schooling.¹³⁶ This had been a common notion in magnetistic theories since the pioneering works of Puységur, and it is no surprise that Lévi came to adopt it. It is noteworthy, however, that he had already come into contact with it in the 1840s and maybe even the 1830s. Discussions of magnetism were omnipresent in the Romantic literature that he had devoured, for example in the works of Lamartine, Gautier, Nerval, Sand or Hugo. In his *Rituel*, he explicitly referred to Sand's *Spiridion* in the context of magnetism.¹³⁷ A look into the works of Balzac, to which Lévi referred enthusiastically throughout his lifetime, is very illuminating.¹³⁸ In the so-called *Livre mystique*, which combined Balzac's *Séraphîta*, *Louis Lambert*, and *Les proscrits*, and which was held by Lévi in the highest regard, one finds a "Traité de la volonté."¹³⁹ This *Traité* contains a number of ideas that would be central to Lévi's occultism, such as the importance of the "imagination,"¹⁴⁰ the notion of a tradition of *magisme* (also mentioned by Ragon),¹⁴¹ and an identification with the doctrine of Swedenborg, which Lévi critically discussed repeatedly.¹⁴² It will be recalled that Lévi had incorporated the ideas of Fourier and Swedenborg in his *science universelle*, and that he had become acquainted with magnetistic and "Swedenborgian" theories (or theories that were perceived as such) in a socialist and Romantic context.¹⁴³

In any case, Constant only revealed an interest in magnetism in his publications after 1853. His most immediate sources, including Du Potet, were those by the "spiritualistic magnetists."¹⁴⁴ Soon he "officially" joined their ranks, as his own books were printed by Germer Baillière, a medical publisher that housed the leading

¹³⁶ *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 106; *Clef*, 287.

¹³⁷ *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 183, 206–07. Cf. George Sand, "Spiridion," in *Œuvres complètes* (Genf: Slatkine, 1980), 414–16.

¹³⁸ E.g., he compared himself and Esquiros with Balzac's Louis Lambert: Lévi, *Histoire*, 522–23. A comprehensive discussion of the role of esotericism for the writings of Balzac can be found in Anne-Marie Baron, *Balzac occulte. Alchimie, magnétisme, sociétés secrètes* (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 2013).

¹³⁹ See Honoré de Balzac, *Le livre mystique*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Werdet, 1835), 181–203. For a detailed discussion, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 342–49. Cf. Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1968), 150–59, and Lynn R. Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emanuel Swedenborg and French Literary Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), esp. 163–64 and Baron, *Balzac*, 41–55.

¹⁴⁰ Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 158; *Histoire*, 220; *Clef*, 122, 96.

¹⁴¹ E.g., *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 8; *Histoire*, 55–56, 92, 177. Cf. Ragon, *Maçonnerie*, 79–93.

¹⁴² Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 1, 169; *ibid.*, 2: 182f.; *Histoire*, 412.

¹⁴³ See Strube, *Sozialismus*, 339–42, where the role of the eccentric Constant Chéneau is discussed in the context of the French reception of Swedenborg.

¹⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, 460–70, 524–34; cf. John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 64–94.

spiritualistic magnetists.¹⁴⁵ In contrast to theoreticians who perceived the magnetic force to be purely physical matter, these spiritualists were convinced of its profoundly religious and traditional implications. By arguing that the recent magnetistic approaches were only a rediscovery of ancient magical wisdom, they heralded a future synthesis of science and religion. Lévi had probably met some of them in the salons of an old friend and comrade, Charles Fauvety (1813–1894), who had argued that the doctrines of Swedenborg, Fourier, and Mesmer were essentially identical. He did so in a journal that he edited with Lévi in 1846, *La vérité sur toutes choses*.¹⁴⁶ These magnetists included Louis Goupy, whose *Quaere et invenies* (1853) was advertised together with Lévi's *Dogme et rituel*.¹⁴⁷ Remarkably often, the spiritualistic magnetists were socialist veterans who were pursuing their old dream of a synthesis of religion, science, and politics, seeking to establish a perfect social order. Du Potet, perhaps the most important source for Lévi's magnetistic-magical theory, had an openly revolutionary past and concealed his socialist tendencies only because of the unfavorable atmosphere of the 1850s.¹⁴⁸ Alphonse Esquiros, who corresponded with Du Potet during the revolutionary years about the implications of magnetism, had discussed "magic, magnetism, and occult medicine" as early as in his *Evangile du peuple* from 1840, a sort of partner publication of the *Bible de la liberté*.¹⁴⁹ In his *La vie future au point de vue socialiste*, which was written after the disastrous June Uprising of 1849 and contains an impressive depiction of Lévi's and Esquiros' despair, he maintained that knowledge about the universal force of magnetism and the "occult" laws of God would be the key to the emancipation of the people: "Until now, science has been the privilege of the rich."¹⁵⁰ For Esquiros, the popularization of magnetism equaled a democratization of science, which opened the paths for social progress.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ E.g., Du Potet published his *Manuel de l'étudiant magnétiseur* in 1846. Other publications include Deleuzes' *Instruction pratique sur le magnétisme animal*, and works by Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet—especially his *Magie magnétique* (1854), which was repeatedly cited by Lévi—Louis Goupy, Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, Charles Lafontaine, and André-Saturnin Morin.

¹⁴⁶ Charles Fauvety and Alphonse-Louis Constant, *La vérité sur toutes choses* (Paris: Auguste Le Gallois, 1846), 41.

¹⁴⁷ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 461.

¹⁴⁸ See, e.g., Du Potet de Sevennoy, *Magie*, 112: "... c'est ainsi que nous pouvons prévoir et annoncer les plus grands changements dans l'humanité. Dieu me garde pourtant de formuler ces changements; on me prendrait pour un socialiste tout rouge." Between 1846 and 1848, Du Potet had praised Mesmer as a great revolutionary and equaled his doctrine with those of Saint-Simon and Fourier in his *Journal du magnétisme*.

¹⁴⁹ Alphonse Esquiros, *L'Evangile du peuple*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Le Gallois, 1840), 93.

¹⁵⁰ *De la vie future au point de vue socialiste* (Paris: Comon, 1850), 143.

¹⁵¹ Years later, his (then ex-)wife Adèle wrote: "Les communistes ont cru trouver l'égalité dans le partage des biens. Mais quand même les parts seraient égales, il y aurait toujours les

The parallels to Lévi's political dimension of occultism are even more striking in the writings of another friend, Henri Delaage (1825–1882), a longtime collaborator of both Du Potet and Esquiros.¹⁵² After he had heralded the regeneration of woman and the “resurrection of the crucified people” in the atmosphere of 1848, he published a remarkable book entitled *Le monde occulte* in 1851. Denouncing contemporary “materialism,” he demanded the study of “occult forces” which had been mastered by the ancients.¹⁵³ Delaage expressed a decidedly “Catholic” identity and emphasized the need for “initiation,” which was inspired by Esquiros and in turn exerted a notable influence on Ragon.¹⁵⁴ He also was visibly influenced by the doctrines of Fourier. Similar to Lévi, he had distanced himself from the “wrong” kinds of socialism after 1851, which he, again like Lévi, saw as especially represented by the “materialist” and “atheist” school of Proudhon. The key to the realization of a perfect social order was, in his eyes, the somnambulism taught by the ancient “initiations,” though this could only be understood in the light of the gospel: “Somnambulism without Kabbalistic initiation is nothing but a meteor that passes over our heads.” This true knowledge was about to be rediscovered, and Delaage viewed himself in the ranks of the “glorious battalion of artists and literates” that would, “despite the jealous attacks of the bourgeoisie,” march towards an “immortal future.” As soon as this true somnambulism was adopted by “the priests,” the synthesis of science and religion and the unity of “social and religious institutions” would be realized, thus achieving true socialism and the “paradise on Earth.”¹⁵⁵ Initiation and Catholicism were for Delaage, as they were for Lévi, obligatory prerequisites for understanding the key to truth.¹⁵⁶

These striking parallels prove that Lévi developed his magnetistic-magical theory in the context of spiritualistic magnetism. This milieu was quite distinct from the emergent French Spiritist movement, although Allan

différences individuelles. ... Le secret de l'égalité ne serait-il pas dans le magnétisme, dans cette vie qu'on se passe les uns aux autres?” See Adèle Esquiros, “Banquet de la Pentecôte,” in *Petite encyclopédie magnétique pour tous. Recueil complémentaire du “Magnétiseur universel”*, ed. Fauvelle Le Gallois (Paris: E. Voitelain et Compagnie, 1868), 26.

¹⁵² Strube, *Sozialismus*, 464–67.

¹⁵³ Delaage, *Monde*, 21–25.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Delaage, *Initiation* and Delaage, *Doctrines*. For Ragon's acknowledgement, see his *Maçonnerie*, 97.

¹⁵⁵ Henri Delaage, *Le monde occulte, ou Mystères du magnétisme dévoilés par le somnambulisme* (Paris: P. Lesigne, 1851), 21–25.

¹⁵⁶ This also becomes evident in the criticism of Esquiros in *Les ressuscités au ciel et dans l'enfer* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1855), 188–89.

Kardec (1804–1869) and his followers, the *spirites*, had also been decisively influenced by socialist, especially Fourierist theories.¹⁵⁷ Lévi's attacks on the *tables tournantes* were exacerbated by his antipathy towards public spectacles. In July 1857, he published a scathing series of articles in the newspaper *L'Estafette*, denouncing the performances of the popular medium Daniel Dunglas Home (1833–1886), who came to be one of his favorite targets.¹⁵⁸ With a typical absence of modesty, Lévi challenged the spectacles by comparing them to his superior "haute magie," a behavior that was ridiculed by the magnetist Louis-Constant Cahagnet as an "advertisement" for his own books.¹⁵⁹ Lévi made no secret of his contempt for somnambulists and mediums, who he regarded as "sick, eccentric, and unbalanced beings."¹⁶⁰ He insisted that "the American doctrine" posed serious risks because it was detached from "priestly authority" and "control by hierarchy."¹⁶¹ When the Spiritist movement became a recognizable force in public discourse, Lévi launched several attacks on it.¹⁶² Yet, his engagement with the actual *spirite* doctrine was strikingly cursory and superficial, even in his *Science des esprits* of 1865.¹⁶³

Modern Catholic Demonology

Lévi paid relatively little attention to the Spiritists and simply referred to them as puerile amateurs. He usually did so by stressing the need for initiation into the Kabbalistic secrets of "true" Catholicism. This strategy, however, did not work so easily against another class of opponents, Catholic authors who started to denounce the new phenomena and the theories they entailed, most especially Jules-Eudes de Mirville (1802–1873) and Roger Gougenot des Mousseaux (1805–1876), who interpreted the magnetistic and spirit phenomena as the

¹⁵⁷ For the central role of Fourierism in Spiritism (and Spiritualism in the USA), see the references in Strube, "Socialist Religion," 373–74.

¹⁵⁸ Lévi, *Histoire*, 172, 88, 456.

¹⁵⁹ Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet, *Encyclopédie magnétique spiritualiste, traitant spécialement de faits psychologique, magie magnétique, swedenborgianisme, nécromancie, magie céleste, etc.*, vol. 3 (Paris: Chez l'Auteur/Germer Baillière, 1858), 202. Cahagnet repeatedly criticized Lévi and his friends, especially because of their self-identification as Catholics.

¹⁶⁰ Lévi, *Histoire*, 172, 494; *Clef*, 140–44, 93.

¹⁶¹ *Histoire*, 297.

¹⁶² *Clef*, 167. Cf. his earlier treatment of disciples of Kardec, the Comte d'Ourches and the Baron de Goldenstubbé in *Histoire*, 500–07.

¹⁶³ Interestingly, Kardec was simply dismissed as a "pantheist" and a poor imitation of the Saint-Simonians, Swedenborgians, and Mormons: *La science des esprits. Révélation du dogme secret des kabbalistes, esprit occulte des évangiles, appréciation des doctrines et des phénomènes spirites* (Paris: Germer Baillière, 1865), 122, 364–65.

workings of the devil and his demons. While they welcomed the new interest in spirituality and the overdue criticism of materialism, they warned of diabolical forces behind the phenomena and urged people to adhere to the Catholic faith in order to avoid being misled by them.¹⁶⁴ Their works have to be counted among the most important sources for Lévi, especially de Mirville's *Pneumatologie: Des esprits et de leurs manifestations fluidiques*, which appeared between 1851 and 1864 in five volumes and was critically reviewed by Lévi's wife Marie-Noémi in the *Revue progressive* (1853). Gougenot des Mousseaux's *Mœurs et pratiques des démons ou des esprits visiteurs* (1854) and his study of *La magie au dix-neuvième siècle* (1860) were less central to Lévi, but still functioned as an important point of reference. Both authors reacted not only to the vogue of magnetism, somnambulism, and Spiritism, but also to the countless cases of possession and other "supernatural" events that had occurred *en masse* since the beginning of the century.¹⁶⁵

Within the Church, the attitude towards magnetism was anything but monolithic. Famously, Henri Lacordaire (1802–1861), one of the most prolific former disciples of Lamennais, had adopted magnetistic theories as early as the late 1840s for his spiritualist apology of Catholicism. In his enormously successful *Conférences* in Notre-Dame, which attracted an audience amounting to tens of thousands,¹⁶⁶ he had even attributed the miracles of Jesus Christ to his mastery of "occult forces."¹⁶⁷ As a matter of fact, Lacordaire, who had taken a seat among the Left in the National Assembly of 1848, was a friend of Delaage's and wrote a preface to *Le monde occulte*.¹⁶⁸ Such exchanges were possible because it took the Church several decades to agree upon an official position towards these matters.¹⁶⁹ It has to be kept in mind that the nineteenth century saw a surge in miracles and apparitions of saints and the Holy Virgin, such as the one in Salette (1846). Church authorities faced the difficult task of

¹⁶⁴ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 537–38; cf. Laurant, *Esotérisme*, 89–92; Nicole Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses et visionnaires en France* (Paris: Michel, 1995), 165–68; Yves Vadé, *L'enchantement littéraire. Ecriture et magie de Chateaubriand à Rimbaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 272; Frank Paul Bowman, "Une lecture politique de la folie religieuse ou théomanie," *Romantisme* 24 (1979): 85–86; Monroe, *Laboratoires*, 30–36.

¹⁶⁵ For a comprehensive overview, see the seminal study by Bertrand Méheust, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité (1784 – 1930)*, 2 vols. (Le Plessis Robinson: Synthélabo, 1999).

¹⁶⁶ Julien Favre, "Lacordaire orateur. Sa formation et la chronologie de ses oeuvres" (Dissertation, Universität Fribourg, 1906), and Renée Zeller, *Lacordaire et ses amis* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1930).

¹⁶⁷ Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, *Conférences de Notre-Dame de Paris*, vol. 3 (Paris: Poussielgue Frères, 1872), 59–60.

¹⁶⁸ Delaage, *Monde*, 5–10.

¹⁶⁹ Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire, *Esotérisme et christianisme. Histoire et enjeux théologiques d'une expatriation* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2009), 196–203.

differentiating between legitimate and reprehensible supernatural phenomena. Lacordaire can be seen as one of those Catholics who interpreted magnetism as a natural “occult force,” while de Mirville and Gougenot des Mousseaux represented those who warned of the infernal forces behind it.¹⁷⁰

Authors such as Du Potet and Lévi, who explicitly referred to a tradition of magical wisdom, naturally came into the firing line of the new Catholic demonologists. Lévi was not outright decried as a necromancer by these vocal adversaries, but they argued that he, just like so many magicians before him, was unwittingly dealing with demons which he was fatally mistaking for a neutral natural agent. An obvious point of attack was the Baphomet and the heretical tradition it represented. De Mirville regarded Lévi as one of the “faux alexandrins modernes,” referring to the Baphomet of the Templars and citing Matter’s study.¹⁷¹ This reminds us once more how prominently the School of Alexandria and the theory of the two opposing traditions emerging from it featured in nineteenth-century debates about religious legitimacy. De Mirville devoted a long passage in the third volume of his *Pneumatologie* to a crushing criticism of Lévi’s works, which supposedly represented a “false spiritualism” rooted in the mystical-pantheistic errors of Alexandria. The Baphomet served him as an easy target, as Lévi himself had presented it as a “pantheistic and magical figure.”¹⁷² Similarly, Gougenot des Mousseaux warned of the dangers of the Astral Light theory symbolized by the Baphomet. Quite correctly, he described Lévi as one of the contemporary *magnétistes transcendants*, alongside Du Potet and Goupy, and warned of his confusion of demonic and natural forces.¹⁷³

Lévi’s defense against such accusations was radical. He simply denied the existence of the devil altogether: “Satan, as a superior personality and as force, does not exist. Satan is the personification of all errors, all perversities, and consequently also of all weaknesses.”¹⁷⁴ That which is referred to “in a vulgar manner” as the devil is nothing but the malicious intentions of misled persons: “The devil, in black magic, is the great magical agent employed for evil by a per-

¹⁷⁰ In 1863, both were invited as referents on an important Catholic congress in Malines where such matters were discussed. See Nicole Edelman, “Somnambulisme, médiumnité et socialisme,” *Politica Hermetica* 9 (1995): 167.

¹⁷¹ Jules-Eudes de Mirville, *Pneumatologie, Des Esprits et de leur manifestations fluidiques*, 5 vols., vol. 2 (Paris: H. Vrayet et Surcy, 1863), 143.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 3: 399–414, cf. 240, 75.

¹⁷³ Roger Gougenot des Mousseaux, *La magie au dix-neuvième siècle. Ses agents, ses vérités, ses mensonges* (Paris: H. Plon, 1860), 45, 360–61, 37, 227–28, 45; cf. *Mœurs et pratiques des démons ou des esprits visiteurs du spiritisme ancien et moderne*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Henri Plon, 1865), xxiv–xxv.

¹⁷⁴ Lévi, *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 213.

verted will.”¹⁷⁵ In his earliest writings, Lévi had adopted a kind of Augustinian doctrine of privation, which interpreted the devil as nothing but the negation of good. In his *Assomption*, he declared that his reading of mystics like Madame Guyon had taught him to “crush the leaden figure of Satan under my feet” and reject the notion of evil and damnation.¹⁷⁶ Also he vehemently protested against the identification of Lucifer with Satan.¹⁷⁷ He developed this further in his theory of the Astral Light and in the broader context of magnetism.¹⁷⁸ Lévi regarded belief in Satan and his machinations as nothing but “superstition.”¹⁷⁹ However, in his occultist writings Lucifer and Satan came to symbolize two opposing tendencies in human nature, which did not exist as independent forces but as positive or negative instrumentations of the Astral Light.¹⁸⁰ This metaphor was applied in religious, philosophical, and political ways, as Lucifer was depicted as the force of liberty and progress, while Satan stood for perversion and anarchy—this is the main reason why it is mistaken to identify the Baphomet with the inverted pentagram described in *Rituel*.¹⁸¹ Lévi’s notion of equilibrium, as represented by the Baphomet, has to be seen against this background. This becomes especially clear in the following passage:

Let us say now, for the edification of the vulgar, for the satisfaction of Monsieur le Comte de Mirville, for the justification of Bodin the demonomaniac, for the greatest glory of the Church, which has persecuted the Templars, burnt the magicians, excommunicated the Freemasons, etc., etc.; let us boldly and frankly say that all initiates of the occult sciences (I am talking about inferior initiates and profaners of the great arcanum) have adored, still adore, and will always adore that which is signified by this dreadful symbol.

Yes, in our profound conviction, the grand masters of the Order of the Temple have adored the Baphomet and they have made their initiates adore him...; but the adorers of this sign do not think like us that it is the representation of the devil, but rather that of the god Pan, the god of our schools of modern philosophy, the

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1: 289; cf. *Ibid.*, 226, 107; *ibid.*, 2: 102.

¹⁷⁶ Constant, *Assomption*, xx.

¹⁷⁷ For a detailed discussion of the sometimes ambiguous relationship between Lucifer and Satan in Lévi’s works, see Strube, *Sozialismus*, 541–43 and “Eliphaz Lévi. Lucifer as Revolutionary and Redeemer,” in *Satanism: A Reader*, eds. Per Faxneld and Johan Nilsson (New York et al.: Oxford University Press). Cf. Luijk, “Satan,” esp. 155–67.

¹⁷⁸ Lévi, *Clef*, 219, 50.

¹⁷⁹ *Histoire*, 291–97, 417.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 12–16, 192–201.

¹⁸¹ *Dogme et rituel*, 2, 98.

god of the theurgists of the School of Alexandria and of the Neoplatonic mystics of our days: the god of Lamartine and of Monsieur Hugo, the god of Spinoza and Plato, the god of the primitive Gnostic schools; even the Christ of the dissident priesthood; and this last qualification, ascribed to the goat of black magic, will not astonish those who study the religious antiquities and who are acquainted with the phases of the diverse transformations of the symbolism and dogma, be it in India, be it in Egypt, be it in Judea.¹⁸²

This is one of the most quoted passages referring to the Baphomet, but oddly enough it has never been put in the context that was made very explicit by Lévi himself: his polemics against Mirville and other Catholic authors. Obviously, his statement about the Baphomet and the tradition behind it is marked by a curious ambiguousness, which might appear puzzling if taken out of context. Lévi was implicitly confirming that the Baphomet was the object of Devil worship, witches' sabbaths and other abominable practices, while at the same time presenting it as an embodiment of the tradition that he regarded as the bearer of the one and only eternal truth. This equivocalness has hopefully become more comprehensible for the reader in light of the dialectical narrative discussed in the previous section, and in light of the various contexts in which Lévi positioned himself as the provider of the universal key to occult wisdom.

5. Conclusion

It has been shown that the notion of synthesis and harmony that underlies Lévi's Baphomet can only be comprehended against the background of the socialist doctrines he articulated in his writings of the 1840s. This political character of his occultism, which became most obvious in his articles for the *Revue philosophique et religieuses*, and then in his writings from *La clef des grands mystères* onwards, is expressed by its final aim to create a perfect social order. Lévi wanted to realize this project by creating an élite of initiates, a kind of occultist *Avantgarde*, who were to take up the secret tradition represented by the Baphomet. The first step towards this was "to create oneself," a task that should follow the emancipatory Luciferian aspiration towards liberty and knowledge. Lévi wrote quite explicitly that he wanted to open up the path to emancipation for everyone, until there would only be "one family" equal before God. Until then, however, the barrier of "initiation" would ensure that only

¹⁸² Ibid., 209–10. The reference to "symbolism" reflects the countless plates that can be found in works such as Matter's and the numerous contemporary studies about the origins of religion.

the worthy would lead the flock towards the light. In developing his notion of initiation he was clearly inspired by Freemasonry, as represented in works such as Ragon's. In the 1850s, Freemasonry had become a gathering point for the opposition, and the salons of Fauvety turned into an important platform for this process.¹⁸³ However, Lévi had been highly skeptical of Freemasonry from the beginning, and only became a Freemason for a short period before polemically distancing himself from the movement and denouncing it sharply. Once more, he had turned his back on those who he regarded as “false” representatives of a tradition which they failed to understand.

The superior “science” that Lévi propagated was supposed to lead to the final synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy. This required the formation of the *science universelle* that Lévi first described in the 1840s and later developed into his magical theory. The reader will have noted the absence of Medieval and Early Modern sources in this article. Lévi did consult the works of authors from those periods, most notably Guillaume Postel, Paracelsus, Franciscus Patricius or Heinrich Khunrath, but his treatment was cursory and remarkably superficial.¹⁸⁴ Instead, it has been demonstrated that his magical theory was developed in the context of spiritualistic magnetism and his polemics against Catholic writers. His concept of the Astral Light, which was so central to his drawing of the Baphomet, can only be understood against the background of the 1850s.

At the center of Lévi's writings stood his identity as a “true Catholic,” an identity that he shared with authors such as Delaage. This question of “true” religion was the subject of literally all the discourses that have been discussed in the present article. It is curious that the School of Alexandria became the focal point not only of debates about the history of Freemasonry, but also about the origins of Christianity, the history of Gnosticism, and the development of socialism, which supposedly ranked among the most recent heirs of either the tradition of error or that of truth. This shows the preoccupation of contemporaries with the origin and the future of religion, which often manifested as a belief in the primitive unity of all religions and its restoration in a future synthesis. Lévi's historical narrative appears against this background, not as the result of an ancient esoteric tradition, but as the outcome of prominent discourses about the meaning and place of religion in modern society.

¹⁸³ Strube, *Sozialismus*, 482–84.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 544–63. Cf. the early criticism by Arthur Edward Waite in Eliphas Lévi, *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, trans. Arthur Edward Waite (London: Redway, 1896), xi–xiii. Waite developed his own highly speculative narrative of initiation to explain the ambiguous doctrine of Lévi.

As one of many socialists who had been disillusioned by the failed revolution of 1848, he developed his occultism in distinct opposition to “false” socialism and “false” Catholicism, the two constant points of reference in his writings, which consequently functioned as his main identity markers. The monstrous figure of the Baphomet is an embodiment of all those aspects: the final synthesis of science, religion, philosophy, and politics, which would be realized through the progressive decryption of the tradition of “true” religion and the creation of the Kingdom of God on Earth.

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Translations of the Zohar: Historical Contexts and Ideological Frameworks*

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Abstract

The Zohar, a compilation of Kabbalistic texts which were written in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, was bestowed an authoritative and sacred status in many Jewish communities. Together with its central role in Jewish culture, the Zohar stimulated considerable interest in Christian Kabbalistic and Western esoteric circles. In recent years, a newly awakened interest in the Kabbalah and the Zohar has been evident in many circles both in Israel and all over the world. The interest in the Zohar stimulated its translation into different languages, each created according to different motivations and within diverse theological and ideological frameworks. This article offers a review of the history of translations of the Zohar and discusses the historical contexts and ideological frameworks in which these were created.

Keywords

Zohar, Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah, Western Esotericism

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Introduction

The Zohar, a compilation of Kabbalistic texts, most of them probably composed in Castile in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, became the central book of Kabbalah and has been accepted in many Jewish circles since the early modern period as an authoritative and sacred text. It was also highly esteemed by Christian Kabbalists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, as well as by modern Western esotericists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, there is ongoing interest in the Zohar in many Jewish circles, as well as amongst non-Jewish spiritual seekers and scholars of Jewish and religious studies.

Most of the Zoharic texts are written in Aramaic. Since the appearance of the Zohar, parts of the text and sometimes the whole Zoharic corpus (which was printed for the first time in the sixteenth century) were translated to different languages. The different translations of the Zohar were all done for the purpose of enabling readers who could not understand Aramaic to approach the Zohar. Yet, these translations differ from one another in the reader-audience they address, in the choice of Zoharic material translated, and in the ideological, political and economic factors that stimulated and enabled the various translation projects.

Partial reviews of Zohar translations were made by Isaiah Tishby in his introduction to *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, and by Gershom Scholem in his encyclopedic article on the Zohar.¹ A detailed review of translations of the Zohar in English was made by Don Karr in 1985 (and updated several times since).² My study is based on these partial reviews, as well as further research in libraries (especially the Gershom Scholem Library at the National Library of Israel), catalogues and archives. The number of Zohar translations, especially anthologies of the Zohar, is very large. Many of the earlier translations were never printed, some of the translations were made in languages which are not accessible to me, and new translations may have appeared after I finished my research. Hence, although I have tried to make my study as comprehensive as possible, it is probably not exhaustive. The purpose of the study is not to provide a full list of Zohar translations; rather, it seeks to outline their history and to examine the different historical, social and ideological contexts in which they were created.

¹ Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 101–2; Gershom Scholem, *Kabbala* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 239–42.

² Don Kar, “Notes on The Zohar in English,” <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/zic.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2016).

In the following, I will offer a chronological survey of Zohar translations, beginning with the early translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, which were made in the fourteenth century. I will discuss the Latin translations of the Zohar made by Christian Kabbalists in the Renaissance, the translation of anthologies of the Zohar into Jewish vernacular languages in the Baroque period, and the Sabbatean inspired translations of the Zohar in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I will further examine the first translations of the Zohar into modern European languages, which were made by Christian authors, as well as later translations into European languages by Western occultists as well as Jewish scholars. I will conclude the article with a discussion of twentieth and twenty-first century scholarly translations of the Zohar, and of the recent translation projects conducted in Jewish orthodox and neo-Kabbalistic circles. Before beginning the discussion of the Zohar translations and their historical contexts, I would like to offer a short introduction on the Zohar and its reception history.

The Zohar and Its Reception

As mentioned above, the Zohar is a compilation of texts which were written by several Jewish Kabbalists in Castile in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The major part of the Zoharic canon constitutes Kabbalistic interpretations of the Torah in Aramaic, which are attributed to the second century sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his companions. Other units making up the Zoharic corpus are *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, *Ra'aya Mehemna*, *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, *Sifra de-Zeni'uta*, and commentaries on Ruth, Lamentations, Song of Songs, and others.³ A significant part of the Zoharic texts was probably composed by the Castilian Kabbalist, R. Moshe de Leon. Yet, scholars agree that some Zoharic components, such as *Tiqqunei Zohar*, *Ra'aya Mehemna* and probably also other units, were written by different authors.⁴

The Zoharic texts were not at first perceived, or circulated, as one literary whole, nor were they initially called “Zohar” or attributed to R. Shimon Bar Yochai. Only in the first decades of the fourteenth century did the new notion of a literary composition called the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendour) emerge among several Kabbalists. Following the emergence of this new idea, Kabbalists and scribes started collecting Zoharic manuscripts and creating compilations of what each of them perceived to be The Zohar, or part of it.

³ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 159–62.

⁴ Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 85–90.

Prior to the printing of the Zohar in the mid-sixteenth century, the content and scope of *Sefer ha-Zohar* was undetermined, and diverse cultural agents created different Zoharic corpora. In the vast collection of Zoharic manuscripts copied between the fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, only a few are identical or can be regarded as belonging to the same family.

The first printings of the Zohar in the mid-sixteenth century created the Zoharic canon as we know it today. The corpus was printed for the first time, almost simultaneously, between the years 1557–1560 in two editions: one in Mantua by a group of Jewish printers, and the other in Cremona by Christians and converted Jews. The Mantua publishers set out by printing a volume of *Tiqqunei Zohar*, later adding three volumes of the Zohar divided according to the portions (*parshiot*) of the Torah. Apart from Zohar commentaries to the Torah, other Zoharic texts were included, such as *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, *Ra'aya-Mehemna*, and *Sifra de-Zeni'uta*. At the same time, the printers in Cremona fashioned their edition in one volume, also arranged according to the Torah portions and including almost all of the texts found in the Mantua edition as well as additional texts, such as a Zoharic interpretation of the Book of Ruth, and *Sefer ha-Bahir*. The printers of both editions created their collections on the basis of several manuscripts. Some Zoharic texts that circulated in manuscript form were not incorporated into the first printed editions. A number of these texts were collected in a special volume, later known as *Zohar Hadash*, printed in 1597 in Salonica.

The Zohar was bestowed an authoritative and sacred status in many Jewish communities; first among the Kabbalist circles in Spain and later on, following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the printing of the Zohar, among many other Jewish communities. It was perceived as the main authoritative source on matters of the Kabbala, and was also influential on issues concerning Jewish customs and laws (*Halacha*). Together with its central role in Jewish culture, the Zohar stimulated considerable interest in non-Jewish circles: among Christian Kabbalists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and occult circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In recent years, a newly awakened interest in the Kabbala and the Zohar has been evident in many circles both in Israel and all over the world.

The interest in the Zohar stimulated its translation into different languages. Throughout the years, from the time the Zohar appeared in the late thirteenth century and up to the present, it has been translated into numerous languages. I would like to turn now to examine the first translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, which were made in the first three centuries following its appearance.

The First Hebrew Translations of Zoharic Literature

It is possible that some translations of passages from Zohar into Hebrew were done before the writing of the Zoharic texts was completed and before the idea of a literary unit called *Sefer ha-Zohar* was formulated. In the writings of Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla and those of Rabbi Moses de Leon, written at the end of the thirteenth century, one finds several passages written in Hebrew which are parallel to texts that appear in the Zoharic corpuses in Aramaic.⁵ Yet, it is difficult to determine whether these passages were translated by these Kabbalists from a Zoharic Aramaic text to Hebrew, or whether the authors of the Zoharic texts translated them to Aramaic from the writings of De Leon and Gikatilla. The first comprehensive translations of Zoharic texts were probably completed in the early fourteenth century by the Kabbalist Rabbi David Ben Yehuda He-Hassid.⁶ Nonetheless, it should be noted that Yehuda He-Hassid does not mention that these texts were translated from the Zohar, which is never mentioned explicitly in his writings.

Zoharic texts translated into Hebrew as *Midrash Yehi Or* (Homily on “Let there be light”) appear in *Menorat Ha-maor*, a book by Rabbi Israel ibn Joseph Al-Nakawa, written in Toledo in the second half of the fourteenth century.⁷ In 1491, Rabbi Isaac Mor Hayyim, a Spanish Kabbalist living in Italy, translated and interpreted the beginning of the *Idra Zuta* (The Small Assembly) in a letter he sent to Rabbi Isaac of Pisa.⁸ Numerous Hebrew paraphrases of Zoharic passages appear in the early sixteenth century in the book *Tzror Hamor* by Rabbi Avraham Saba.⁹ More comprehensive translations of the Zohar into Hebrew were produced in the late sixteenth century, including one in Egypt by Rabbi Yehuda Masud,¹⁰ as well as two other anonymous translations in Egypt, one of them written in 1576.¹¹

⁵ Asi Farber-Ginat, *Joseph Gikatilla's Commentary on Ezekiel's Chariot* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1998), 29 (Hebrew); Elliot Wolfson *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses De Leon's Sefer Harimon* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 47–48.

⁶ Moshe Idel, “The Translation of R. David ben Judah Hehasid of the Zohar and His Interpretation of the Alfa Beita,” *Alfi sefer* 8 (1980): 60–73; (1981): 84–98 (Hebrew); Daniel C. Matt, *The Book of Mirrors* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1986), 13–15.

⁷ Hyman Enelow, *Sefer menorat hama'or* by Israel ibn Joseph Al-Nakawa (New York: Bloch, 1929–1931).

⁸ Albert William Greenup, “A Kabbalistic Epistle by Isaac b. Samuel b. Hayyim Sephardi,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 21 (1931): 370–74.

⁹ Abraham Gross, *Iberian Jewry from Twilight to Dawn: The World of Rabbi Abraham Saba* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 68.

¹⁰ Parts of this translation are found in the following manuscripts: New York JTS MS 1769, New York JTS MS 2009, Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University MS 1065, St. Petersburg MS Evr. Antonin A 9, St. Petersburg MS. Evr.II A 801, Jerusalem Rabbi Kook Institute MS 745.

¹¹ Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel MS Heb. 8^o147. The other translation, which was

The first translations of Zoharic texts into Hebrew, mainly in the late fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth century, were done in order to spread the Zohar beyond the elite rabbinical circles that were fluent in Aramaic, aimed at larger educated Jewish circles that could read Hebrew but found it difficult to read Aramaic. Thus, Rabbi Isaac Mor Hayyim explained in his letter to Rabbi Isaac of Pisa that he translated an article of the Zohar into Hebrew because Italian Jews were not proficient in Aramaic.¹²

The first Zohar translations into Hebrew were circulated only in manuscripts. The printing of the Zohar in the mid-sixteenth century aroused severe objections among Kabbalists who claimed that the Zohar was an esoteric text that should not be distributed publicly. It may well be that this objection was the reason that the first translations into Hebrew were not printed. As we will see later on, translations of the Zohar in Hebrew appeared in print for the first time only in the seventeenth century, in anthologies that contained only stories and moral advice from the Zohar.

The First Translations of the Zohar into Latin

The first translations of the Zoharic literature were made into Hebrew by Jewish scholars for a Jewish readership. From the beginning of the sixteenth century the Zohar was also translated into Latin by Christian authors, for the benefit of Christian readers. Within the framework of the Renaissance notion of ancient wisdom - *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis*.¹³ Christian scholars showed great interest in the Kabbalah and The Book of Zohar perceived to contain ancient divine wisdom. At the outset of the sixteenth century, Latin translations of passages from the Zohar (mostly based on quotes from the Zohar in Rabbi Menachem Recanati's commentary of the Torah) were included in the writings of Paul Riccius, Pietro di Galatino and Agostino Giustiniani.¹⁴ Around the same

copied in the year 1603 is found at Oxford, Bodleian Library MS 1561. Parts of this translation were printed in 1946. See Obadya Hedaya *The Complete Book of the Zohar on the Torah* (Petach Tikva: Yalkut, 1946).

¹² Albert William Greenup, "A Kabbalistic Epistle by Isaac b. Samuel b. Hayyim Sephardi," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 21 (1931): 370.

¹³ On the notions of *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis* see Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6–8.

¹⁴ See François Secret, *Le Zohar chez les Les Kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Mouton, 1964), 25–34; Gershom Scholem, "Considérations sur l'histoire des débuts de la kabbala chrétienne," in *Kabbalistes Chrétiens*, eds. Gershom Scholem et al. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979), 31; Khen-Melekh Merhavyah, "Two Quotes from *Midrash hane'elam* in a Latin Manuscript,"

time, sections of the Zohar were translated into Latin for the Cardinal Egidio de Viterbo, probably by Baruch of Benevento.¹⁵ In 1553, the French Christian Kabbalist, Guillaume Postel, finished a comprehensive translation of the Zohar to Genesis, with a commentary. According to Postel, the one who helped him understand the Zohar was an illiterate Venetian nun, Mother Johanna. Postel could not find a publisher for his translation, probably because of the radical messianic commentary it contained. Because he did not receive back the manuscript of his translation, which he sent to the printer Oporinus in Basel, Postel prepared a second translation, which was based on the Cremona edition of the Zohar. This translation, which was more comprehensive than the first, was lost.¹⁶ In the introduction to his second translation of the Zohar, Postel wrote that the Zohar contains the oral version of the Torah delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai and put into writing by Simeon the righteous, mentioned in the New Testament, who belonged to a secret Jewish group that believed in Jesus.¹⁷ He believed that the truths of the New Testament and the Zohar were identical and that they contained the doctrine of the true religion that was abandoned by the Jews, who rejected Jesus, and forgotten by the Christians.¹⁸ Postel, who regarded himself as the “Pope of the natural Zoharic theology,” viewed the translation of the Zohar as a messianic mission symbolizing the beginning of the fourth and final historical era that follows the third era considered to have begun with Christ’s birth.¹⁹

Translations of the Zohar into Latin in the sixteenth century were done with the perception that that the Kabbalah in general and the Book of Zohar in

(Hebrew), *Kiryat sefer* 23 (1968): 566–67. A few short texts from the Zohar were translated into Latin earlier, most likely in the fourteenth century. See *ibid.*, 568.

¹⁵ François Secret, *Le Zohar chez les Les Kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Mouton, 1964), 23, 34–42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23, 51–63; Marion L. Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel, Prophet of the Restitution of all Things: His Life and Thought* (Hague: Nijhof, 1981), 110, 112–13, 137; Judith Weiss, “Guillaume Postel’s Introduction to His First Latin Translation and Commentary on the Book of Zohar” (Hebrew), in *And This Is for Yebuda: Studies Presented to Our Friend, Professor Yebuda Liebes*, eds. Maren R. Niehoff, Ronit Meroz, and Jonathan Garb (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2012), 258–59; Ronit Meroz and Judith Weiss, “The Source of Guillaume Postel’s 1553 Zohar Latin Translation,” *Renaissance Studies* 28, no. 4 (2014): 1–14; Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann *Geschichte der Christlichen Kabbala*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012), 582–96.

¹⁷ Bernard McGinn, “Cabbalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought,” in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, eds. R.H. Popkin and G.M. Weinder (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

particular contain ancient divine knowledge, as well as hermeneutic techniques that reveal and prove the truths of Christian doctrines. Consequently, Christian Kabbalists were greatly interested in broadening the acquaintance with the Zohar among the Christians through its translation into Latin, and among the Jews through its distribution in the original languages. Therefore, in addition to the Latin translations of the Zohar, Christian Kabbalists took part in copying Zohar manuscripts and were involved in printings of the Zohar in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century.

The Latin translations and the Christians' involvement in printing the Zohar had an influence on the internal Jewish controversy regarding its publication. Rabbi Jacob Israel Finzi, one of those most vehemently opposed to the printing of the Zohar, claimed that its publication would play into the hands of Christians interested in its translation: "Thus, God forbid, it would get into the hands of the nations and they would copy it into their language and do with it as they please."²⁰ Rabbi Emmanuel of Benevento, one of the printers of the Mantua edition of the Zohar, dismissed Finzi's objection, arguing that the Christians already had access to Kabbalistic writings: "Both in manuscripts and in print in their tongue."²¹

Anthologies of Zohar Translations in Hebrew and Yiddish

As mentioned above, the translations of the Zohar into Hebrew did not appear in print in the sixteenth century, most likely because of the objection to distributing the Zohar to the public that followed the controversy of its first printings. Translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, as well as into Yiddish, were first printed in the seventeenth century. These were mostly anthologies of Zohar passages that were perceived as exoteric and not comprehensive translations. A short anthology of Zohar translations in Hebrew, *Mekor Hokhmah*, by Rabbi Issachar Baer of Kremnitz, was published in Prague in 1611. An adaptation in Yiddish of a passage from the Zohar describing the righteous women's palace in the Garden of Eden was published as an appendix to *Sefer Olam Haba* in Hanau in 1620. In 1660 Constantinople, a comprehensive anthology of Zohar articles translated into Hebrew was printed in the book *Me'ulefet Sapirim* by Rabbi Shlomo Algazi. Stories from the Zohar (as well as from other Kabbalistic sources) translated into Yiddish were published in *Ma'seh Adonai* by Rabbi Simeon Akiva Baer ben

²⁰ Simcha Assaf, "The Controversy over the Printing of Kabbalistic Literature" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 5 (1939): 8.

²¹ *Ma'arechet Ha'Elobut* (Mantua, 1558), 4a.

Joseph, which was first published in the beginning of the seventeenth century in Frankfurt-am-Main. The same author also included tales from the Zohar in Yiddish in *Abir Ya'akov*, first published in Sulzbach in 1700.

As stated, translations of the Zohar were meant to expand the circle of its availability to an audience that was unable to read it in its original form. Yet, because the Zohar was perceived as an esoteric text that roused animated controversy even when printed in Aramaic, the Jewish scholars who translated it into Hebrew and Yiddish had to justify their actions. The authors of the first printed anthologies of Hebrew translations of the Zohar justified their translations by distinguishing between the esoteric and exoteric sections of the Zohar and by claiming that the anthologies contained “*pesbat*” (the simple, literal meaning of texts) articles which are allowed to be distributed to the public. Rabbi Issachar Baer of Kremnitz describes his book, *Mekor Hokhmah*, as “*peshtei Zohar*” intended for the “masses of the world”, Rabbi Shlomo Algazi also stressed that his anthology contained a collection of Zohar articles “according to the way of *pesbat*.” The distinction between *pesbat* articles of the Zohar and its secretive parts (*sodot*) enabled the distribution of Zohar passages to the larger public through their translation into Hebrew and Yiddish, while preserving the image of the Zohar as an esoteric text.

Printing of Latin Translations of the Zohar

We have seen above that the Zohar was already translated into Latin in the sixteenth century. However, large parts of Zoharic literature appeared in Latin in print only in the late seventeenth century, in the second volume of the highly influential book by the Christian Kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1684). Differing from the Jewish scholars who translated and published only passages perceived as exoteric in the seventeenth century, Knorr von Rosenroth translated the sections perceived to be the most esoteric: *Sifra diTzenni`uta*, *Idra Raba* and *Idra Zuta*. Up until the twentieth century, von Rosenroth’s book was the most important source for spreading the Kabbalah in general and the Book of Zohar in particular in European culture. As we will see further on, some of the translations of the Zohar into European languages that were published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were based on the Latin translations of Knorr von Rosenroth.

Similar to Christian Kabbalists of the sixteenth century, von Rosenroth found in the *Zohar* the pure and ancient source of ancient wisdom that had been passed on from generation to generation:

In the Cabbalist writings of the Jews I hoped I would be able to discover what remained of the ancient Barbaric-Jewish philosophy... I had no greater wish than that I might be permitted to enjoy the sun itself and its bright light once all the clouds of obstructions and hindrances were scattered. I scarcely hoped I would be able to catch sight of this light unless I followed in the footsteps of that river and arrived at the spring itself. I believed that I would discover this spring in these very ancient books.²²

Following the Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance period, Knorr von Rosenroth and the Christian Kabbalists who worked with him in the court of Count Christian August in Sulzbach viewed the Kabbalah and the *Zohar* as an effective means of converting Jews. In the first volume of *Kabbalah Denudata*, von Rosenroth asserted that from experience he had learned that deepening Christians' knowledge of the Kabbalah enabled a better dialogue with the Jews. He believed that presenting the truths of Christianity in terminology accepted by the Jews could persuade them to convert to Christianity. Translations of the *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic writings in *Kabbalah Denudata* were intended to deepen Christian knowledge of the Kabbalah; he hoped that this would help convince the Jews to read the Christian scriptures: "by which means at length the Jews would be able to read our writings and gradually be drawn back into the way of truth."²³

From this perspective, translation of the *Zohar* into Latin was only part of a broader mission of the Kabbalistic-Christian collaboration of von Rosenroth and members of his circle. In 1684, the same year von Rosenroth's translations of the *Zohar* into Latin were published, the Christian Kabbalists in Sulzbach initiated and financed the printing of the *Zohar* (in its original language) in Uri Ben Shraga Bloch's publishing house. This edition was no doubt intended to broaden the Jews' acquaintance with the *Zohar*, which, as said, was perceived by Christian Kabbalists to be consistent with Christian doctrines. That same year, the Christian-Kabbalistic collaboration in Sulzbach was concluded with a printing of the Syriac New Testament in Hebrew type, *Ditika Hadata*. It may well be that this printing was meant to enable Jews proficient in Zoharic

²² Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach 1677). I follow the translation of Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 111.

²³ Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677), 74; Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 113.

Aramaic to read the New Testament in a similar language and, as von Rosenroth had hoped, discover the similarity between the Zohar and Christianity.²⁴

Knorr von Rosenroth's translations of the Zohar into Latin were not only intended for a missionary purpose, they were also motivated by internal Christian interests. Von Rosenroth, who attributed post-Reformational discord amongst the Christians to their reliance on Greek philosophy, argued that returning to the original source of Christianity, which was found in the Kabbalah, would unite the Protestants and the Catholics (as well as the Jews), in the single, true faith:

Because I suspected that so great a separation of Christian religions arose from no other cause than from such great diversity among Christians of philosophical principles and metaphysical definitions... it immediately occurred to me that I should hunt out that same ancient philosophy which flourished at the time of Christ and the Apostles... As I was about to examine those ancient opinions about God and other spiritual and theological matters, I fell upon this most ancient book of the Jews, which is called Sohar, or Book of Splendor... I discovered that the chapters themselves and teachings, which ought rather to be called fragments, are ancient enough and amply set forth the most ancient opinions and hypotheses.²⁵

Despite von Rosenroth granting the Kabbalah great importance, there is also an apparent ambivalence in his evaluation of the Zohar, which he describes as dirt containing nuggets of gold and precious gems within it:

I entered the path, worn by few, traversed by no one I knew, and, furthermore, filled with so many hard stones, uneven places, chasms, precipices, and such mud that it is not surprising that so many, filled with dread, abandoned it with disgust... I shall sketch for you in a few words what gold and whatever gems I have thus far dug out of this dirt and what hope leads me further.²⁶

In the beginning of the eighteenth century two additional anthologies of Latin translations of the Zohar were printed. In 1720, in Amsterdam, the Swedish Hebraist, Andreas Norrelius published a short book called: *Phosphoros Orthodoxae Fidei Veterum Cabbalistarum*. This anthology contains Zoharic passages with

²⁴ Boaz Huss, "The Text and Context of the Zohar Sulzbach Edition," in *Tradition, Heterodoxy and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2006), 117–38.

²⁵ Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677), 74. I follow the translation of Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 114.

²⁶ Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677), 4. I follow the translation of Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 114–15.

Christological interpretations, taken from the book *Mateb Moshe* (The Rod of Moses), the Zohar interpretation of Norrelius's teacher, the converted Jew Johan Kemper (formerly Moshe Ben Aharon Cohen of Krakow).²⁷ The Zohar passages and interpretations from Kemper's work are incorporated in the original language (Aramaic and Hebrew) and translated into Latin, with specific comments by Norrelius, who opened his book with a lengthy introduction that includes a Latin translation of the famous liturgical poem *Bar Yochai* by Rabbi Shimon Ibn Lavi. Norrelius's book was printed a second time, in a French translation, in the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁸

Norrelius also accepted the early dating of the Zohar and its attribution to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (whom he identifies as Simeon the righteous, who, according to the Gospel of Luke, received the baby Jesus into his arms).²⁹ Norrelius, like his teacher Kemper, assumed that the Zohar contained original Jewish doctrines identical to the teachings of early Christianity. Like von Rosenroth and his circle, Norrelius had missionary aspirations in translating the Zohar. In the opening pages of his book he declared that it was intended for both Jews and Christians and as aforesaid, he printed the Zoharic passages and Kemper's Christological interpretation in the original language as well. In the introduction he stated that his aim was to spread among the Jews – and strengthen among the Christians – belief in the trinity, and called upon the Jews to recognize that the Christians maintained the pure and true belief of their forefathers.³⁰ Norrelius tried, unsuccessfully, to print the translation of the New Testament in Hebrew written by Kemper. This is a further similarity between Norrelius and Kemper's activities in Uppsala in the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the project of Knorr von Rosenroth and his circle in Sulzbach in the late seventeenth century.

Norrelius's translation project was connected to the Sabbatean movement.

²⁷ See H. J. Schoeps, "Rabbi Johan Kemper in Uppsala," *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 46 (1945): 146–75; Shifra Asulin, "Another Look at Sabbateanism, Conversion, and Hebraism in Seventeenth-Century Europe: Scrutinizing the Character of Johan Kemper of Uppsala, or Moshe Son of Aharon of Krakow" (Hebrew), in *The Sabbatean Movement and Its Aftermath: Messianism, Sabbateanism and Frankism*, ed. Rachel Elior, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2001), 423–70; Elliot Wolfson, "Messianism in the Christian Kabbalah of Johann Kemper," in *Millenarianism and Messianism in the Early Modern World*, eds. M. Goldish and R. H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 139–87.

²⁸ The French translation by Jean de Pauly was published as *Aurore de la Foi Orthodoxe des Anciens Cabbalistes* in the occultist journal, *Le Voile D'Isis*, vol. 38, 1933, by Paul Vulliaud. I will expand on other translations of the Zohar by de Pauly and Vulliaud later on.

²⁹ Andreas Norrelius, *Phosphoros Orthodoxae Fidei Veterum Cabbalistarum* (Amsterdam, 1720), 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

The Zoharic texts that he translated are taken from the book *Matteh Moshe*, by Johan Kemper, who was a Sabbatean prior to his conversion. Shifra Asulin demonstrates that Kemper did not abandon his Sabbatean ideology after his conversion, and several Sabbatean concepts and doctrines can be found in his commentary.³¹ Norellius probably was not aware of his teacher's hidden Sabbatean agenda. Yet, interestingly, he noticed the similarities between his teacher's doctrines and those of the Sabbatean Nehemia Hiya Hayun in his book *Oz le-Elohim* (a chapter of which Norrelius translated into Latin).³²

Additional translations of the Zohar into Latin from the beginning of the eighteenth century are found in the anthology by Gottfried Christoph Sommer, *Specimen Theologiae Sobaricae* (Gothae, 1734). Similar to the translations of von Rosenroth and Norrelius, there was also a missionary Christian-Kabbalistic motive behind Sommer's translation. Sommer, who divided his book into twenty sections based on various Christian dogmas, believed in the compatibility between the Zohar and the New Testament, and included articles from the Zohar in his book that he felt were in affinity with Christian doctrines. As I will show later on, a translation of Sommer's book into German was included in Friedrich Christoph Oetinger's *Öffentliches Denkmal der Lebhaftel Prinzessin Antonia*, printed in Tübingen in 1763. Translations into German and Yiddish, based on Sommer's book, appeared in the nineteenth century.

Knorr von Rosenroth's translations were also the basis for translations of the Zohar into English and French in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the same period in which Norellius's book was translated into French. Hence, these Latin translations of the Zohar, mainly von Rosenroth's but also those of Norellius and Sommer, became the central source of acquaintance with the Zohar in European non-Jewish culture up to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yiddish and Ladino Translations of the Zohar

I would like to turn back to Jewish translations of the Zohar. In the period that Christian Kabbalists were translating the Zohar to Latin, several translations appeared in Jewish vernacular languages – Yiddish and Ladino (Jewish Spanish). As mentioned, several short passages, mostly tales, from the Zohar had already been published in Yiddish translation in the late seventeenth century. A more comprehensive translation of Zoharic articles in Yiddish, the

³¹ Shifra Asulin, "Another Look at Sabbateanism," 438–58.

³² Norrelius, *Phosphoros Orthodoxae Fidei Veterum Cabbalistarum*, 22–23, 353.

book *Nabalat Tzvi*, was first printed in the beginning of the eighteenth century (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1711). The translation written by Rabbi Zelig Chotsh was published by his great-grandson, the Sabbatean sage Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Chotsh. This translation was published in numerous editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some under the title *Nofet Tsufim*.

In contrast to the translations of the Zohar into Hebrew and Latin intended for educated circles that were proficient in these high culture languages, translations of the Zohar into Yiddish were intended for wider circles, including women. Thus, the title page of the book *Nabalat Tzvi* carried the following verse: *Assemble the people, men, women and little ones and the sojourner within your gates so that they may hear* (Deuteronomy 31:12).

Like the editors of anthologies of Zohar articles translated to Hebrew, Rabbi Tzvi Chotsh and those who approbated his book defined the Zoharic articles in *Nabalat Tzvi* as “*peshatim*” (simple meanings) and “words of moral.” Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz of Frankfurt wrote in his approbation: “He [i.e., Chotsh] wishes to print here *peshatim* and words of moral from the Book of Zohar in the language of Ashkenaz [i.e., Yiddish] to merit the masses, the young and the old, the women and the simple people...”³³

Alongside the claim that the texts included in the book *Nabalat Tzvi* belong to the *peshat* level of the Zohar, Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz presents another justification for printing the Zohar in Yiddish:

If I would have said that it should not be printed in the language of Ashkenaz, because of the holiness of the Zohar...it is to the contrary. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai himself wrote in a foreign language, the language of translation [i.e., Aramaic] spoken at that time by the whole nation. And although there are reasons and deep explanations for his writing in the language of translation (as is explained in revealed and concealed books), nonetheless, he was not concerned whether women and simple people would read it [i.e., the Zohar].³⁴

According to Katz’s claim, the Book of Zohar – in its entirety – was written as an esoteric text from the outset and therefore its distribution should not be prevented but encouraged through translation into the colloquial language.

A different justification for the translation of the Zohar into Yiddish was raised by Rabbi Wolf of Dessau, who claimed in his approbation to *Nabalat Tzvi* that the secrets of the Kabbalah should be revealed in the days of the Messiah:

³³ Chotsh, *Nabalat Tzvi* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1711), Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz of Frankfurt approbation.

³⁴ Chotsh, *Nabalat Tzvi*, Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz of Frankfurt approbation.

And now he [i.e., Chotsh], thought to print revealed articles from the Book of the Zohar, in the language understood by women and those whose strength is as women's, so that they will know God and the land will be filled with knowledge. As it is written in the holy Book of the Zohar: "When the days of the Messiah are near, even children will explore the secrets of wisdom."³⁵

The claim that in the age of redemption the limitations on revealing Kabbalistic knowledge and teaching the Zohar are void, which originates in Zoharic literature itself, appeared in many sources in the first half of the sixteenth century and served to justify the first printings of the Zohar.

The first translations of the Zohar in Ladino were most likely written during this same period. These translations, whose original date of writing is unknown, are found in manuscripts from a later period that were held by the Donmeh - the Sabbateans who converted to Islam.³⁶ This, added to the fact that Rabbi Tzvi Chotsh, who printed the translation of the Zohar in Yiddish, was also a Sabbatean, indicates that Sabbatean circles stood behind the spreading of the Zohar in spoken languages in the first half of the eighteenth century. Rabbi Moshe Hagiz's critique of translating the Zohar into spoken languages and teaching it to young boys and women, published in his book *Mishnat Hakhamim* (1733), is also directed, most likely, against Sabbateans who spread the Zohar among the uneducated echelons of society:

Now every empty-headed, mischievous, poor youth takes the Book of Zohar in his hand and goes out with it to the public and boasts throughout the city that he knows to explain and clarify and translate it from language to language and reads it before women and children in a foreign language [i.e., vernacular].³⁷

Translations into the vernacular in the eighteenth century were done within the Sabbatean effort to spread the Zohar, which as mentioned held a central position in their movement. Sabbatean circles were involved in the printing of Zoharic literature in the first half of the eighteenth century and in spreading ritualistic reading customs; most of the commentaries on the Zohar that were printed during this period were written by Sabbateans.³⁸

³⁵ Chotsh, *Nahalat Tzvi*, Rabbi Wolf of Dessau approbation (According to Zohar, vol. 1, 117b).

³⁶ A translation of the Idra Rabba is found Jerusalem, National Library MS heb 8^o917. A translation of the Idra Zuta is found in Jerusalem, National Library MS. heb 8^o918 and heb 8^o2086. Translations of Zohar passages to Ladino are found also in Cambridge, Harvard MS. Heb 79.

³⁷ Moshe Hagiz, *Mishnat Hakhamim*, (Wandsbeck, 1733), 56b.

³⁸ Boaz Huss, *The Zohar: Reception and Impact* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016), 223–32.

The First translations of the Zohar into German

In the late eighteenth century the first Zohar translations into a modern European language appeared. As mentioned above, the German Lutheran theologian, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger included in his book *Die Lehrtafel der Prinzessin Antonia* (Tübingen, 1763) a German translation of Zohar texts (done by his friend Karl Hartman), printed in Latin in the above-mentioned book by Gottfried Christian Sommer. In 1824, in Berlin, an additional translation of Zoharic texts into German appeared (printed aside the Aramaic original), also based on Sommer's anthology, by the Protestant theologian and orientalist Friedrich August Tholuck, entitled *Wichtige Stellen des Rabbinischen Buches Sohar*. In the introduction, Tholuck reiterates the Christian-Kabbalists' notion that the Zohar contains equivalents of the Christian doctrines.³⁹ The purpose of the anthology of translations of the Zohar, says Tholuck, is to broaden Christian theologians' knowledge of Kabbalah and provide them with an arsenal in their mission to spread the Christian Gospel to the Jews:

From this important book we provide here a series of noteworthy articles that a Christian scholar, Sommer, has previously collected. They are mainly these, which greatly agree with the Christian doctrine. The missionaries of the Christian faith among the Jews will be able to use these to reach, by themselves, a deeper insight of ancient rabbinical scriptures, and to persuade the Israelites that so much of what they condemn in Christianity has already been declared by their forefathers as holy teaching ... Through these the distinguished missionary of faith among the Israelites will be given a new arsenal with which he will enlighten some of the sons of Abraham and awaken the will of Christian theologians to study the scriptures of the Jews and to spread Christian knowledge among them.⁴⁰

Tholuck hoped that the Jews would also read his book and in his introduction – he also appealed to the “Sons of Israel who are reading these pages.” Later, in Warsaw, 1844, Tholuck's anthology was published in a Yiddish translation by the Anglican mission.⁴¹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, additional editions of Tholuck's German text were published as well as another edition of Oetinger's book.⁴²

³⁹ August Tholuck, *Wichtige Stellen des Rabbinischen Buches Sohar* (Berlin, 1824), 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁴¹ The Zohar texts from this book were reprinted (in the original Aramaic) by Ephraim Deinard in the framework of his polemics against the Zohar, in order to show that it is “full of Christian opinion.” Ephraim Deinard, *Alatab* (St Louis, 1927), 51.

⁴² Gerhard Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin 1927), 116, 154.

A new translation into German of the Zohar articles translated by Sommer and Tholuck, prepared by the Jewish convert to Christianity, Johann Heinrich Raphael Biesenthal, was published in Berlin in 1854 under the title *Auszüge Aus dem Buche Zohar*. In the introduction, Biesenthal claims that his translations, based on the original text, are better than those of his predecessors, notwithstanding the difficult language, and the “exceptional dark mysticism” of the Zohar.⁴³

During this same period, translations of the Zohar came out for the first time in other European languages: English and French. These translations also relied on Latin versions (though on Knorr von Rosenroth’s rather than Sommer’s). Nevertheless, as I will show in the following, these translations were not done out of Christian-missionary ideology, but rather in the framework of the esoteric and occultist trends of the turn of the nineteenth century. Before I turn to discuss these translations, I would like to give a short review of a few translations of the Zohar done by Jews in the nineteenth century.

Jewish Translations of the Zohar in the Nineteenth Century

In contrast to the eighteenth century, during which, as we saw above, several translations of the Zohar were written in Yiddish and Ladino, throughout most of the nineteenth century very few translations were written that were intended for the Jewish audience. In the 1830s, Rabbi Elyakim Milzahagi of Brody prepared a large translation in Hebrew, which was part of a comprehensive commentary to the Zohar that he wrote which was never printed and was lost.⁴⁴ Milzahagi was affiliated with the Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment) circles in Galicia, and his text was, most likely, the first Zohar translation written in the framework of the Jewish enlightenment movement. In 1859, an anthology of Zohar texts in Ladino, *Sefer Leket HaZohar in Ladino*, prepared by Avraham Ben Moshe Finzi, was published in Belgrade. The translation included 248 Zohar articles, mainly tales and moral sayings. Translations of Zohar texts in French appeared in the book by Michel Weill, Chief Rabbi of Algeria, *La Morale du Judaïsme*, printed in Paris in 1875.⁴⁵ As we will see in the following, we see the first translations of Zohar texts into French (based on the Latin

⁴³ Johann Heinrich Biesenthal, *Auszüge aus dem Buche Sohar mit deutscher Übersetzung* (Berlin: P.G Löw, 1854). I am grateful to George Kohler, who helped me read the introduction.

⁴⁴ Elyakim Milzahagi mentions this in his unprinted book found in MS Jerusalem 4^o121 Heb, 4a.

⁴⁵ Zoharic texts translated into French were included earlier in a book by the scholar Adolphe Franck, *La kabbale ou, La philosophie religieuse des Hébreux* that was published in Paris in 1843 (and translated a year later into German by Adolf Jelinek).

translations of Knorr von Rosenroth) at about the same time in non-Jewish occultist circles as well.

In 1887, the first – and as far as I know the only – translation of the Zohar in Jewish-Arabic was printed in Pune, India. Differing from the anthology of Zohar texts in Ladino that included texts perceived as *peshat*, the translation printed in Pune is of one of the most esoteric portions of the Zohar, the *Idra Zuta*. The book, entitled *Idra Zuta, or the Lesser Holy Assembly, Translated from the Aramaic Chaldee into Arabic [in Hebrew Characters]*, was translated and printed by Avraham David Ezekiel, a member of the Iraqi Jewish community in India. The translation of the *Idra Zuta* was the first of nine Arabic-Jewish publications (most of them translations of Kabbalistic texts, including *Sefer Shomer Emunim* and *Sefer Yetzira*) that were printed by Ezekiel in the printing house he founded in Pune, in the years 1878–1888.⁴⁶ The Translation of the *Idra Zuta* into Jewish-Arabic enraged the rabbis of Jerusalem, Hebron and Baghdad. A decree against Ezekiel’s translation, signed by the chief rabbis of Jerusalem, was published in the Jerusalem Hebrew newspaper, *Havazelet*:

We are thus obliged to decree in the power of the Divine Presence (*Shechina*) which never left the Wailing Wall, and in the power of the holy *Torah*, that no son of Israel should be allowed to read the above mentioned printed *Idrot* in other languages, under any circumstance. Furthermore, every person called by the name of Israel, has the obligation to make an effort to keep and hide the translations in a place where no foreign hand can reach them, and eliminate them from the world.⁴⁷

In response, Ezekiel wrote the rabbis a letter in which he defended his translation.⁴⁸ Ezekiel asserted that far from being forbidden to translate the *Idra*, it is “a religious obligation (*mitzva*) to study and teach and write and translate it into Arabic, which is the accustomed language amongst us.”⁴⁹ He relies on a passage from Hayim Vital’s introduction to *Etz Hayim*, to the effect that it is a *mitzva* to reveal kabbalistic secrets of the *Zohar*, as this revelation will bring forth redemption. He adduces several examples of kabbalistic texts written in foreign languages, or translated into them. He writes, defiantly, that the decree did not

⁴⁶ Boaz Huss, “The Sufis From America: Kabbalah and Theosophy in Puna in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, eds. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 167–93.

⁴⁷ *Havazelet* 18 (18), 24 February 1888 (12 Adar 5648), 138–39.

⁴⁸ The letter was published by Pinchas Grayevsky, “On the Translation of the Idrot to Arabic” (Hebrew), *Megintzei Yerushalaim* 2 (1930): 15–16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

achieve its goal, but on the contrary enhanced the sales of the book, which was now out of stock. As mentioned, contrary to most of the prior translations into Jewish languages, which avoided translating the esoteric portions of Zoharic literature, Ezekiel chose to translate and print one of the most secretive texts of the Zohar. Why did Ezekiel choose this specific portion and bring upon himself the wrath of the rabbis of Baghdad, Hebron and Jerusalem?

The answer to this lies in Ezekiel's membership in the Theosophical Society and his connections with its leaders, Madame Helena P. Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott.⁵⁰ Blavatsky and other members of the Theosophical Society (and, as will be shown later, also members of other Western esoteric movements that were active during the same period) were greatly interested in the Kabbalah. Because their knowledge of it was drawn mostly from the Christian Kabbalistic tradition, the Zoharic texts that they were acquainted with were mainly texts owing to Knorr von Rosenroth's translation. In exactly the same year that Ezekiel's Jewish-Arabic translation of the *Idra Zuta* was printed in Pune, an English translation of the text was printed by Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, who was also affiliated with the Theosophical Society. The connection between the two translations is revealed by the fact that in both the *Idra Zuta* is translated into English as "The Lesser Holy Assembly."

Western Esoteric Translations of the Zohar into English and French

Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, the first translator of the Zohar into English, was a member of various English occultist groups and one of the founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In London, in 1887, he published English translations of the Zohar, based on Knorr von Rosenroth's Latin translation of *Sifra Detzniuta*, *Idra Raba* and *Idra Zuta*. Similar to the Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Mathers saw in the Zohar a means of unveiling the original message of Christianity. However, Mathers, like other esotericists of his period, opposed institutionalized Christianity, and hoped for a spiritual Christian revolution that the translation of the Zohar would serve to advance:

I say fearlessly to the fanatics and bigots of the present day. You have cast down the Sublime and Infinite one from His throne, and in His stead have placed the demon of unbalanced force; you have substituted a deity of disorder and of jealousy for a God of order and love; you have perverted the teaching of the crucified One.

⁵⁰ Boaz Huss, "The Sufis From America," 167–93.

Therefore at this present time an English translation of the Qabbalah is almost a necessity, for the Zohar has never before been translated into the language of this country nor as far as I am aware, into any modern European vernacular.⁵¹

During the same period additional English translations of the Zohar were printed in the United States; these were written from a similar perspective by the independent scholar and freemason Isaac Myer.⁵² In contrast to Mathers, Myer did not base his translations on those of Knorr von Rosenroth, rather he translated from the original Aramaic. His Zohar translations were included in his book *Qabbalah: The Philosophical Writings of Solomon Ben Yebuda Ibn Gabirol*, printed in Philadelphia in 1888. Similar to Mathers, Myer accepted the antiquity of the Kabbalah in general and the Zohar in particular, however he placed less of an emphasis on the Kabbalah's similarity to original Christianity, and instead emphasized its similarity to Asia's "Ancient Wisdom Religion":

The Qabbalah of the Hebrews is undoubtedly of great antiquity, a reminiscence of an ancient "Wisdom Religion" of Asia, for we find its doctrines, in germ, in the ancient Buddhist, Sanskrit, Zen, and Chinese books, also examples of its peculiar exegesis in the occult book, Genesis, and in Jeremiah. The present text-book of the Qabbalah is the Sepher ha-Zohar, Book of Illumination, or Splendor.⁵³

English translations from the Zohar, which were prepared by Nurho de Manhar (also known as William Williams), a member of The Golden Dawn, were published in the early twentieth century in the occult journal, *The Word*, edited by Harold Percival in New York.⁵⁴

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several translations of the Zohar were printed in French; these were also written in the framework of increasing interest in esoteric and occult teachings at the turn of the century. The first of these translations is that of the *Idra Raba* by Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–1875), which is based on Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbalah Denudata*. Lévi's translation was included in *Le Livre des Splendeurs*, which was

⁵¹ Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (London: G. Redway, 1887), 2.

⁵² Many more translations from the Zohar into English, based on earlier translations, as well as on the original Zohar, are found in Myer's archive in New-York public library. <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/2090#detailed> (accessed 15.11.2016).

⁵³ Isaac Myer, *Qabbalah: The Philosophical Writings of Solomon Ben Yebuda Ibn Gabirol* (Philadelphia: The author, 1888), 439.

⁵⁴ The translations were published in the volumes of *The Word* printed 1906–1913 (vols, 4–12). The translations, compiled by John H. Draais, were reprinted in Nurho de Manhar, *Zohar: Bereshith, Genesis, and expository translation from Hebrew* (San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1978).

printed in 1894 by his follower Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1919). Eliphas Lévi emphasized the antiquity of the Kabbalah, which according to him was known to Jesus and John the Apostle (but not to Paul, who only had a notion of its existence).⁵⁵ According to Lévi's outlook, the Zohar contains the universal secrets of revelation of which Judaism informed the world, secrets shared with Freemasonry, Gnosticism, the Templars and other occult movements.⁵⁶ Eliphas Lévi's translation of the *Idra Rabba* was intended to spread the universal gospel of the Kabbalah, which would unite Jews and Christians, remove ignorance and fanaticism, and serve as a basis for world peace:

Study of the Kabbalah will turn the Jews and Christians into a single and united nation. Ignorance and fanaticism will in vain aspire to perpetuate war. Peace is already presented in the name of philosophy, and tomorrow it will be implemented by religion, liberated from the control of the desires of humanity. We must prepare for this tremendous event by revealing the concealed treasures of the Jewish wisdom to men of science. And for this we are publishing the translation and commentary of the theogeny of the Zohar found in the *Sifra Detzniuta*.⁵⁷

In 1895, a year after the printing of Eliphas Lévi's *Le Livre des Splendeurs*, French translations from other Zoharic units in the *Kabbalah Denudata* were published by Henri Chateau, a member of L'Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix, with an introduction by Papus.⁵⁸ A translation of the *Sifra Detzniuta* entitled *La Clef du Zohar* by Albert Jounet (1863–1923), a Christian socialist and a member of the French Theosophical Society, was printed in Paris in 1909. Jounet, whose translation was written from an occult-Christian perspective, assumed that despite the Zohar's being written in the thirteenth century, it contains ancient doctrines that concord with Christian esoteric teachings and with the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Chinese, Indian, Celtic and Greek mysteries.⁵⁹ Following Lévi, Albert Jounet also viewed spreading the Zohar as a means of mending the rift between Jews and Christians. However, differing from Lévi and other occultists, Jounet presented a clear Christian missionary position, very close to that of the Christian Kabbalists from earlier periods. According to Jounet, becoming acquainted with the Zohar would enable Christians to acknowledge the esoteric truths found in the Old Testament, and the Jews to

⁵⁵ Eliphas Lévi, *Le Livre des Splendeurs* (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

⁵⁸ Henri Chateau, *Le Zohar* (Paris: Chamuel, 1895).

⁵⁹ Albert Jounet, *La Clef du Zohar* (Paris: Bibliothèque Chacornac, 1909), 1.

understand the truths of Christianity.⁶⁰ Then “the Jews and the Christians will unite in prayer to Jesus, who dwells in eternity and awaits their reconciliation, to reveal his glory to the world.”⁶¹ Jounet concluded his introduction with “the Kabbalistic promise that the Messiah will come to this world because of the Book of Zohar.”⁶² Despite his great admiration of the Zohar, “whose religious and philosophical sublimity cannot be contested”,⁶³ Jounet displayed an orientalist ambivalence regarding the Zohar:

Like most of the Oriental books, and particularly those written through initiation, the Zohar appears chaotic. First of all, it is compiled of varied works, mixed up without any order. Secondly, these works do not adhere to the logical methods of the West. The authors of the Orient follow the rules of musical composition more than they do the rules of literary composition.⁶⁴

As we will see in the following, similar orientalist ambivalence is also expressed in the writings of Jewish scholars who studied and translated the Zohar at the same period.

The first comprehensive translation of the Zohar into French (and into a European language in general), was printed in Paris by Emile Lafuma between 1906–1912. The author of the translation, Jean de Pauly – who claimed he was an Albanian aristocrat but was most likely the notorious converted Jew, Paul Meyer – died in 1903 before his translation was printed.⁶⁵ De Pauly accepted the early origins of the Zohar and, following the Christian Kabbalists who preceded him, claimed that the Zohar contains Christian doctrines. In his words, the Zohar is: “An appropriate book to enlighten men and to contribute to the glory of God... There is nothing better suited to achieve this goal than a translation of the Zohar whose doctrines, even if these precede Christianity, reinforce the Christian truths.”⁶⁶ The publisher, LaFume, who shared the view that the Zohar contains Christian doctrines,⁶⁷ also expressed ambivalence

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3–4.

⁶¹ Ibid., 4.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica*, 120; Paul Fenton, “La Cabbale et l’Académie,” *Pardes*, 19–20 (1994): 229; Dominique Bourel, “Notes sur la première traduction française du Zohar,” in *Jüdisches Denken in einer Welt ohne Gott, Festschrift für Stéphane Mosès*, eds. J. Mattern, G. Motzkin and S. Sandbank (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2000), 120–29.

⁶⁶ De Pauly wrote this in a letter to LaFume, dated 1900, that is quoted in Bourel, “Notes sur la première traduction,” 125.

⁶⁷ Jean de Pauly, *Le Livre de la splendeur: Doctrine ésotérique des Israélites*, (Paris: LaFume, 1906), 4.

toward it. LaFume compared the Zohar to a great river at whose source (the ancient Jewish-Christian tradition) the water is pure, but which becomes polluted with erroneous doctrines and traditions as time goes on.⁶⁸ Despite this, he claimed the enlightened reader could find “pure lumps of gold and precious stones” in its waters.⁶⁹

When it was published, De Pauly’s translation caused great reverberations, and throughout the twentieth century several anthologies of the Zohar in French were based on it.⁷⁰ De Pauly also translated into French the anthology of Zoharic articles in Latin by the Swedish Hebraist, Andreas Norellius, which was discussed above. The translation was printed in 1933 by Paul Vulliaud, in *Le Voile d’Isis* under the heading: “Aurore de la Foi Orthodoxe des Anciens Cabalistes.” In 1930, Vulliaud published a translation of the *Sifra Deẓniuta*, based on de Pauly’s translation.⁷¹

Jewish Neo-Romantic and Zionist Translations

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several Jewish European scholars worked on translating the Zohar into various languages, influenced by turn-of-the-century neo-romantic and orientalist perspectives. As we will see in the following, some of these translations integrated Western esoteric perceptions of the Kabbalah with a Jewish nationalist approach.

Naphtali Herz Imber (1856–1909), a Hebrew poet whose song “ha-Tikva” (“the Hope”) became the anthem of the Zionist movement (and later of the State of Israel), translated several Zoharic passages into English. These translations were published posthumously in his book, *Treasures of Two Worlds*.⁷² Imber, who was associated with theosophical and occult circles, related that the reform rabbi, Shlomo Schindler, and the president of the Boston branch of the Theosophical Society, George Ayers, proposed in 1893 to fund a complete translation of the Zohar into English.⁷³ Similar to other Jewish nationalist

⁶⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Bourel, “Notes sur la première traduction,” 127–28. De Pauly’s translation was reprinted in Paris in 1970.

⁷¹ Paul Vulliaud, *Traduction intégrale du Sifra Di-Tẓeniutha, le livre du secret* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1930)

⁷² Naphtali Herz Imber, *Treasures of Two Worlds: Unpublished Legends and Traditions of the Jewish Nation* (Los Angeles: Citizens printing shop: 1910), 76–110.

⁷³ Imber referred to this plan in an article he wrote in the journal he edited, *Uriel*, published (in only one volume) in 1895. See Naphtali Herz Imber, “What is the Cabbala?” *Uriel* 1(1), (1895): 19. See Boaz Huss, “Forward to the East: Naphatali Herz Imber’s Perception of

thinkers, who will be discussed later, Imber viewed the Kabbalah in general and the Zohar in particular as a vital spiritual Jewish tradition, juxtaposed to the dogmatic rabbinical tradition: “That book is in opposition to Rabbinical tradition: as it explains the laws according to their esoteric meanings and spiritual solutions, which are in conflict with the dim, dogmatic dead letter.”⁷⁴

Within the context of large projects which translated Jewish literature into German, such as Buber and Rontzweig’s translation of the Old Testament and Buber’s translations from Hassidic literature, several translations of the Zohar appeared. Christian Ginsburg related that Ignatz Stern, a Jewish Hungarian scholar active in the late nineteenth century, prepared a German translation of the *Sifra Detzmita*, and of the *Idra Raba* and the *Idra Zuta*, which remained archived in manuscripts.⁷⁵ In 1913, Ernst Müller and Shmuel Hugo Bergman, who were both active in the Zionist movement and later became interested in Rudolph Steiner’s Anthroposophy, published translations of several Zoharic passages at the end of the volume *Vom Judentum*, prepared by the Zionist student union of Prague, Bar Kochba.⁷⁶ Müller published further translations of Zoharic articles in the journal *Der Jude*, between 1913 and 1920.⁷⁷ In 1920, he published a book about the Zohar including translations, and in 1932 he published an anthology of Zoharic articles translated into German.⁷⁸ An additional anthology of Zoharic articles translated into German was published in Berlin by Jankew (Jakob) Seidmann, who was also associated with Zionist circles.⁷⁹

In the same period, Jewish scholars in Eastern Europe began to translate Zoharic texts into Hebrew and Yiddish. In 1921, in the second part of his Hebrew article “The Key to the Book Zohar”, published in parts in the journal *Ha-Tekufa* in Warsaw, Hillel Zeitlin published an anthology of translated Zoharic texts with a commentary. Zeitlin introduces his anthology with an enthusiastic description of the Zohar:

What is the Zohar? The Zohar is a sublime, divine soul that descended suddenly

Kabbalah,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2013): 404.

⁷⁴ Imber, “What is the Cabbala?” 16.

⁷⁵ Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development, and Literature* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1955), 230.

⁷⁶ *Vom Judentum: Ein Sammelbuch* (Leipzig: K. Wolff, 1913), 274–84.

⁷⁷ Eleonore Lappin, *Der Jude 1916–1928* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 362.

⁷⁸ Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar und Seine Lehre: Einleitung in die Gedankenwelt der Kabbalah* (Wein & Berlin: R. Löwit, 1920); Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar: Das Heilige Buch Der Kabbalah, Nach dem Urtext* (Wien: Heinrich Glanz, 1932).

⁷⁹ Jankew Seidman, *Aus dem heiligen Buch Sohar des Rabbi Schimon ben Jochai* (Berlin: Im Welt, 1932).

from the world of emanation down to earth in order to be revealed to the eyes of man in millions of lights and shadows, colours and hues. God, blessed be He, picked one precious stone from his crown and threw it down, and the stone shattered and scattered, sowing myriads of sparks, elating, rejoicing, and delighting in myriads of shapes and shades that emerged from eternity to illuminate all the dark corners and to satisfy all that craves and yearns for light; and to sustain and warm everything that had been killed by the chill of science and the darkness of ignorance, and the blindness, and the burden of nature, and the malice and the hardship, and the cruelty of mankind. The Zohar was revealed to the people of Israel and to the entire world through visions, parables, tales, and flashing words, piercing thoughts, the heights of heaven, the depths of the abyss, the glory of the stars, the language of divine heights, the murmur of eternal trees, the depth of the forest thicket⁸⁰

However Zeitlin's position on the Zohar is not unequivocal. His neo-romantic enthusiasm from the Zohar is ambivalent and coupled with disdain, reminiscent of the attitude of Knorr von Rosenroth and other non-Jewish translators of the Zohar:

The Zohar – a mixture of the deepest of the deep truisms and fantasies, straight and crooked lines, straight and misleading paths, fit, perfect, and clear sketches and alien and strange ones, the strength of a lion and the weakness of a child, the sound of cascading waters and the whisper of a spring, pits of darkness and caves of mysteries, brevity, clarity, and acuity of eternal wisdom and prolonged discussions that continue endlessly, infiltrating one another and interweaving as in a long and complex dream . . . according to its content and its richness, the Zohar is all – divinity; its exterior often confusing and uncertain.⁸¹

In 1922–1923 an anthology of Zoharic tales by the writer and historian Azriel Nathan Frenk (1863–1924) was printed in two volumes. Frenk, like other thinkers of his time, emphasized the value of the Zohar as a national Jewish text:

This is how the Zohar shed its spirit over all of us, over all the sons of our nation; it was absorbed in our blood, our soul, our spirit and our essence, and it implanted within us gentleness and innocence, mercy and forgiveness, the aspiration for greatness, glory, magnificence; it ridiculed the sufferings of exile and the tortures of this world, mocked the obstacles and hurdles in our lives, which characterize our people and are rarely found among the nations. The Zohar planted all these

⁸⁰ Hilel Zeitlin, “The Key to the Book Zohar” (Hebrew), *Ha-Tkufah* 6 (1920): 314.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

[traits] in the hearts of those who studied it, and they disseminated it among all the people of our nation that they led.⁸²

Frenck emphasized the national merit of translating the tales of the Zohar into Hebrew:

The purpose is to allow those who know Hebrew, in abundance or little, at least something from something out of the beauty found in the Zohar, from these things that became, as said, a part of our soul, our spirit, our essence, we decided to choose a collection of tales from this book and edit these in a way that they would be understood by anyone, young and old, those who learned Hebrew and are used to reading a bit in the Holy books... We believe that in this book we will successfully integrate the beauty of the books of Kabbalah into the new Hebrew literature, intended for both those who know and those who are learning Hebrew.⁸³

However, as with Zeitlin, there is an apparent ambivalence toward the Zohar in Frenck's words. Alongside his great admiration for the Zohar he claims: "In addition, there are many mistakes in the Book of Zohar, things are twisted, confused, and missing..."⁸⁴

During this same period Shmuel Hirsh Setzer (1882–1962), a scholar from Eastern Europe who later settled in the United States (and immigrated to Israel in his final years), published translations of Zoharic articles in Yiddish, and later on in Hebrew.⁸⁵ Like other Jewish thinkers of his time, Setzer described the Zohar in enthusiastic, poetic language: "The book of the glory and foundation of the secret doctrine, the Book of Zohar, the big and deep mystical sea, whose waves rise to the heights of human imagination and crash in the lofty space into splinters of color and shades the eye will never be satiated from viewing."⁸⁶ Setzer reflects about his translations:

My main worry was that the gentle intoxicating scent that emanates from the original words would not dissipate in translation. That nothing would be lost from the wonderful poetic spirit, from the lofty vividness that they excel in, by its being

⁸² Azriel Nathan Frenck, *Sefer agadot hazohar* (Warsaw: Achiasaf, 1923–4), vol. 1, 12 (Hebrew).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁵ Setzer's translations of the Zohar into Yiddish were published in the journal *Das Wort*, volumes 1–4 (1921–1924). Zoharic articles translated into Hebrew were printed by Setzer in volumes 24–23 and 38–39 of the journal *Ha-Doar* (1954). These translations were reprinted after he died in Shemuel Tsevi Setzer, *Selected Writings* (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot le-Sifrut, 1966), 110–17.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

poured from vessel to vessel. That as far as possible nothing would be lost from the enormous impression the words in their original form can have on the reader even when these will be read from my translation.⁸⁷

Alongside these scholars one must also note the Hebrew author and Nobel Prize laureate, Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1887–1970), who included passages of the Zohar translated into Hebrew in his book *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe), first printed in Jerusalem in 1938.

In the interval between the two world wars, two publishing houses initiated a comprehensive undertaking of translating the Zohar into Hebrew. Working in Berlin, the national poet Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) introduced a plan to publish the Zohar in Hebrew with Dvir publishing house, however the plan was never consummated.⁸⁸ At the same time Hillel Zeitlin began a project of translating the Zohar into Hebrew, initiated by Ayanot publishing house, also operating in Berlin. According to Simon Rawidowicz who managed the publishing house, translation of the Zohar was among the first priorities of Ayanot, who viewed this undertaking as “a unique national obligation.”⁸⁹ In the end, only the translation of the introduction to the Zohar was published, after Zeitlin perished in the Holocaust.⁹⁰

Increasing interest in the Zohar and in Kabbalah in general in the first half of the twentieth century led to competition between different translators. This competition was expressed in Hillel Zeitlin’s critique of the unbecoming rabbinical language used by Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg in his translation of the Zohar, *Sefer Shaarei Zohar Torah* (which will be discussed in the following). He also criticized Rosenberg’s (whom he refers to as “Rosentzweig”!) choice to only translate the Zohar partially: “This translation has no scientific or religious value. The rabbi who translated it (his name is Rosentzweig) only collected a few homilies from each portion and translated them into imprecise and unbecoming rabbinical Hebrew.”⁹¹ Zeitlin wrote an even harsher critique of the anthology by Azriel Nathan Frenk: “Its value is much less than that of the book *Shaarei Zohar Torah*, because it contains only a few pages and has absolutely nothing in it; there are only a few parts translated from a few easy

⁸⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁸ Jonatan Meir, “Hillel Zeitlin’s Zohar: the History of a Translation and Commentary Project” (Hebrew), *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 10 (2004): 124.

⁸⁹ *HaMetzuda* 1 (1942): 36.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 40–81.

⁹¹ Hillel Zeitlin, “A letter to Simon Rawidowicz,” *HaMetzuda*, vols. 3–4 (1945): 340.

places. It is only suitable for young people.”⁹² On the other hand, Bialik, who as mentioned aspired to do a translation of the Zohar for Dvir, raised doubts before Rawidowicz whether Zeitlin was the best person to translate the Zohar, and claimed, most likely in an attempt to thwart Zeitlin’s translation project, that he had a translation in hand, ready to go to print!⁹³

The Soncino Zohar Translation

As we saw above, in the framework of increasing interest in the Kabbalah in general and the Zohar in particular in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Zohar was translated in its entirety into French by the converted Jew Jean de Pauly. At that time, only the Zoharic units published in Latin in Rosenroth’s *Kabbalah Denudata* had been translated into English, by Samuel MacGregor Mathers, along with a few additional Zoharic articles translated by Isaac Myer and Naftali Hertz Imber. A comprehensive edition of the Zohar in English was prepared for the first time only in the 1930s, by the Soncino Press. The translators were the Jewish scholars Maurice Simon and Harry Sperling, and Paul Phillip Levertoff, a Jewish-born convert to Christianity. They were assisted by the scholar, rabbi, and Theosophist Joshua Abelson, who wrote the introduction to the edition. In his introduction, Abelson described the Zohar as “a compilation of a mass of material drawn from many strata of Jewish and non-Jewish mystical thought and covering numerous centuries.”⁹⁴ Abelson also expressed the national, neo-romantic idea that the Zohar in particular and the Kabbalah in general represent the mystical spirit that grants vitality to rabbinical Judaism:

Indeed herein may be said to lie the undying service which the Cabbalism has rendered Judaism, whether as creed or as life. A too literal interpretation of the words of Scripture giving Judaism the appearance of being nothing more than an ordered legalism, an apotheosis of the “letter which killeth” a formal and petrified system of external commands bereft of all spirit and denying all freedom of the individual – these have been, and are still in some quarters, the blemishes and shortcomings cast in the teeth of Rabbinic Judaism. The supreme rebutter of such taunts and objections is Cabbalah. The arid field of Rabbinism was always kept well watered and fresh by the living streams of Cabbalistic lore.⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 341.

⁹³ Simon Rawidowicz, *My Conversations with Bialek* (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1983), 41, 46 (Hebrew).

⁹⁴ Maurice Simon, Harry Sperling and Paul Levertoff, *The Zohar*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino, 1931–34), xi.

⁹⁵ Ibid., xiv.

However, Abelson too expresses an ambivalent stance, characteristic of the modernist scholars, in describing the Zohar as “a veritable storehouse of anachronisms, incongruities and surprises.”⁹⁶

The Soncino edition was the main source of acquaintance with the Zohar for the English speaking world in the twentieth century. Only in the past few decades, as we will see, have additional comprehensive translations into English been done, with the intention of replacing this edition.

The Hebrew Translations of Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg and Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag

In the same period, the Zohar was also translated into Hebrew among traditional circles in response to the awakening interest in the Zohar among Jewish scholars and Zionists (and perhaps also in response to the interest non-Jews showed in the Kabbalah and the Zohar at the time). Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg (1859–1935), a Hassidic Polish rabbi who immigrated to Canada in 1913, translated large portions of the Zoharic literature (a translation which, recall, won a belittling critique from Hillel Zeitlin). Rosenberg began his project of translating and editing the Zohar in Hebrew in Poland and continued in Canada. He edited the Zoharic articles in the order of the Torah portions, and printed his translation with a short commentary called *Ziv HaZohar* (the light of the Zohar), alongside the Aramaic source. Like the traditional translators preceding him, Rosenberg refrained from translating the more esoteric sections of the Zohar, such as *Sifra Detzniuta* and the *Idrot*. The first volume was published in Warsaw in 1906 and the complete translation was published later in Montreal and New York, between 1924–1930.⁹⁷ In the introduction to his book, Rosenberg repeats the claims justifying the spreading of the Zohar that were used in earlier periods, first and foremost the claim that the Zohar will be revealed in the final generation before redemption: “It is explained...that the Book of Zohar will be revealed in a new and celebrated way in the final generation, and this revelation is its spreading among the general public of Israel.”⁹⁸

Rosenberg’s project of translating the Zohar was related to the national Jewish awakening of the time, the increase in the scope of Hebrew readers, and the publication of secular literature in Hebrew. Rosenberg presents his

⁹⁶ Ibid., xii.

⁹⁷ Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, *Sha’arei Zohar Torah* (Warsaw: Edelstein, 1906); *Zohar Torah al Hamishab Humshei Torah*, vols. 1–5 (Montreal, 1924–5. Reprint New York: Rosalg, 1955).

⁹⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, 5a.

translation of the Zohar as a response to the rise of Jewish secular literature, which he describes as “books of heresy”:

And we see that because of our numerous transgressions books of heresy are greatly increasing during these times and their buyers are many. They succeed in catching souls in their net by glamorizing the books in all kinds of embellishment. This is principally because these books are written in a clear and easy language. And the holy books, full of the light of the holy Torah, are set aside in the corner. In particular the holy book of Zohar which is regarded as something that is obscure, that is not understood, like some kind of amulet.⁹⁹

Due to the fact that Aramaic was much less known among Jews in the modern era, Rosenberg asserts that the Zohar must be translated into Hebrew: “This idea did not let my eyes sleep or my soul rest for a long time and forced me to take upon myself this difficult task to translate to the holy tongue all the articles and in-depth commentaries from the book of Zohar so that they could be understood by the community of Israel.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the fact that the perspective of Rosenberg’s translation is traditional and the background for his project, he says, is the struggle against secular education, the effect of the national Jewish awakening is apparent in his words. Thus, in his paraphrase of the words of the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Avraham Azulai, Rosenberg identifies Schechina, the Divine presence, as the national light: “And know that the main purpose of the Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in writing the Zohar was that at that time the national light (i.e., the Shechina) was without abundance, without support and with no assistance.”¹⁰¹

The most comprehensive translation of the Zohar into Hebrew written in the modern period is the famous translation and interpretation of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag (1884–1954), who was associated with Hassidic circles in Poland prior to his emigration to Palestine in 1921. The translation and interpretation of the Zohar, *Hasulam* (the ladder) is the final literary undertaking of Rabbi Ashlag, who previously had worked mainly on writing commentaries on Lurianic texts, which is the context in which he developed his unique Kabbalistic doctrines. The *Sulam* commentary, including the translation of the Zohar into Hebrew, constitutes the apex of Ashlag’s project of spreading the Kabbalah and eliminating limitations on the study of esoteric aspects of the Zohar. In his

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Rosenberg, *Zohar Torah*, vol. 1, 5a.

¹⁰¹ Rosenberg, *Zohar Torah*, vol. 1, 5a. Compare to Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le Avraham* (Amsterdam: Imanuel Ataias, 1685), 7a. (There, of course, the words “national light” do not appear.)

introduction to his commentary and translation, Ashlag reiterates the traditional approach that justifies spreading the Zohar with eschatological reasoning:

And now in this generation, as we are already nearing the end of the last two thousand years, permission has been granted to reveal his [i.e. Isaac Luria's] words, may his memory be blessed, and the words of the Zohar to the world in a large measure, in such a way that from this generation and onward the words of the Zohar will begin to be revealed more and more until the entire measure, as the blessed God has desired, is revealed.¹⁰²

Based on this eschatological approach, Rabbi Ashlag justifies the spreading of the entire Zohar to the greater public. Contrary to the Kabbalists in earlier periods who sufficed with translations of the *peshat* of the Zohar, and in contrast to Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, who refrained from translating the esoteric portions (as did the translators of the Soncino edition to English), Rabbi Ashlag interpreted and translated the entire Zohar (except for *tikkunei* Zohar that were translated after he died by his disciple Rabbi Yehuda Zvi Brandwin). In an article he wrote after *Hasulam* was printed he asserted that the scope of his commentary and translation project served as proof that his generation had reached the days of redemption:

And here is the strong proof that our generation has reached the days of the Messiah because our eyes see that all the previous commentaries of the Book of Zohar did not even explain ten percent of the most difficult parts of the Zohar and even the little they did were as abstruse as the words of the Zohar itself. In this generation we have been given the interpretation of *Hasulam*, which is a complete interpretation of the words of the Zohar and does not leave any ambiguity of the Zohar unexplained. And these explanations are based on the simple analytic common sense that any average reader can understand. And the fact that the Zohar is revealed in this generation is clear proof that we are already within the days of the Messiah, at the outset of the same generation about which is said “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9).¹⁰³

It should be noted that although Ashlag was a non-Zionist ultra-orthodox Rabbi, he connected the spreading of the Zohar to the revival of the Jewish nation, and he viewed both the establishment of the State of Israel and the spreading of the Zohar through the interpretation of *Hasulam*, as evidence of the beginnings of redemption. Following the above he wrote:

¹⁰² Yehuda HaLévi Ashlag, *Hasulam*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Itur Rabanim, 1955), 17.

¹⁰³ Yehuda ha-Lévi Ashlag, *Matan Torah* (Jerusalem: Kabbalah Research Center, 1982), 134–35.

This concedes that it is our generation that is the generation of the days of the Messiah. And therefore we have been granted redemption of our holy land from the hands of the gentiles. We have also been granted the revelation of the Book of Zohar. Which is the beginning of implementing the saying “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9) “and they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying: ‘Know the Lord’; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them” (Jeremiah 31:33).¹⁰⁴

The First Academic Translations of the Zohar

Some of the translations of the Zohar that appeared in the first half of the twentieth century were written from a modern academic perspective, using critical, historical and philological tools. Some of the Jewish scholars discussed above who dealt with translating the Zohar (Hillel Zeitlin, Nathan Frank and Joshua Abelson) received academic training. Yet, the most outstanding representative of the academic approach to the study of the Kabbalah and the Zohar in the twentieth century is Gershom Scholem who, similar to other Jewish scholars previously discussed, turned to the study of Jewish mysticism under the impact of Zionist ideology and the influence of the neo-romantic trends of the early twentieth century. Scholem’s most significant studies on the Zohar are his article “Did Rabbi Moses de Leon write the Zohar” from 1926 (in which he raises doubts regarding the ascription of the Zohar to Rabbi Moses de Leon),¹⁰⁵ and the two chapters dedicated to the book of Zohar in his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, printed for the first time in 1941, in which he retracted his opinion and determined that the entire Zohar was written by de Leon.¹⁰⁶ As we will see in the following, in addition to these studies Scholem translated Zoharic articles into German, and later on into English.

Despite Scholem reaching the conclusion that the Zohar is a pseudo-epigraphic work written by Rabbi Moses de Leon, he believed that its value as one of the most notable books in Jewish literature – and mystical literature in general – was not blemished. He asserted: “To the streak of adventurousness which was in Moses de Leon, no less than to his genius, we owe one of the most remarkable works of Jewish literature and of the literature of mysticism

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰⁵ Gershom Scholem, “Did Moses de León Write the Zohar?” *Mada’ei hayabadut*, 1 (1926): 16–29.

¹⁰⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 156–204.

in general.”¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, together with his great esteem for the book and the genius of its author, Scholem is party to the ambivalence regarding the Zohar and Kabbalah which characterized the attitude of many modern Jewish thinkers. Scholem’s ambivalence regarding the Zohar was expressed in his words on the primitive modes of thought and feeling of the author of the Zohar, alongside profound, contemplative mysticism:

[T]he author’s spiritual life is centred as it were in a more archaic layer of the mind. Again and again one is struck by the simultaneous presence of crudely primitive modes of thought and feeling and of ideas whose profound contemplative mysticism is transparent... a very remarkable personality in whom as in so many mystics, profound and naive modes of thought existed side by side.¹⁰⁸

In 1935, Scholem published his book *Die Geheimnisse der Schöpfung, Ein Kapitel aus dem Sohar* (The Secrets of Creation: A Chapter from the Zohar), which included a German translation of the beginning of the book of Zohar and a historical introduction. Later on, in 1949, Scholem published a selection of Zoharic articles translated into English, in partnership with Sherry Abel. Later this anthology was translated into many other languages, including French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Dutch.¹⁰⁹ The purpose of the small volume of translations of the Zohar to English was, in the words of Scholem: “conveying to the reader some notion of the power of contemplative fantasy and creative imagery hidden within the seemingly abstruse thinking of the Kabbalists.”¹¹⁰

Scholem rejected – often with extreme severity – other modern translations of the Zohar, because these did not meet academic criteria or because of their lack of literary value. In his introduction to his German translation, Scholem criticized the translations of the Zohar that preceded it in German and other European languages, without mentioning specifics.¹¹¹ In a review of Zohar translations published in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (and later printed in his book *Kabbalah*), he criticized the translation of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, which he

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 175.

¹⁰⁹ Gershom. Scholem, *Le Zohar: Le livre de la splendeur*, trans. E. Ochs (Paris: Seuil, 1980); Scholem, *El Zohar: el libro del esplendor* trans. L. Colomé (México: Berbera, 1984); Scholem, *Zoar: o livro do esplendor*, trans. Ana Maria Moreno Bueno (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Renes, 1977); Scholem, *Zohar: Il Libro dello splendore*, ed. E. Loewenthal (Torino: Einaudi, 1998); Scholem, *De Zohar, kabbalistische fragmenten*, (Amsterdam: J. P. Schoone, 1982).

¹¹⁰ Gershom Scholem, *The Book of Splendour: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken, 1976 [1949]), 23.

¹¹¹ Scholem, *Die Geheimnisse der Schöpfung*, 19.

claimed lacked all literary value, and the translation of Rabbi Ashlag – for being too literal and full of errors.¹¹² He also rejected de Pauly's translation into French and accused him of “distortions and adulterations.”¹¹³ Scholem approved of the good style of the Soncino translation to English of Sperling, Simon and Levertoff, but he claimed that it suffered from an incomplete and erroneous, understanding of the Zohar.¹¹⁴

Scholem's critique of modern Zohar translations is an expression of competition for the Zohar's cultural capital, which increased in the beginning of the twentieth century among various circles, both Jewish and non-Jewish. In his critique of other Modern translators of the Zohar, Scholem asserted his and his pupils' expertise in philological and historical research methods, expertise that other translators of the Zohar at the time did not possess. Hence, the only modern Zohar translation which he was prepared to acknowledge as valuable, without reservation, was that of his student Isaiah Tishby, which was translated, according to Scholem, in a “meticulous and fine style.”¹¹⁵

The translations of the Zohar into German and English were marginal aspects of Scholem's broad activity in Kabbalah research. He found little interest in spreading the Zohar to the broader public and integrating it in contemporary culture. A single attempt to spread the Zohar to the broad Israeli public, in the framework of the modern academic school of Kabbalah research founded by Scholem, was the above-mentioned anthology of Zohar translations done by Scholem's disciple, Isaiah Tishby, called *Mishnat Hazohar* (The Wisdom of the Zohar). The first volume of the book, which includes thematic introductions to the Zohar accompanied by translations of relevant passages, was published by the Bialik press in 1949. The second volume was published in 1961 and a shorter version was published by the Dorot press in 1969.¹¹⁶ The purpose of the book, as described by Tishby in the introduction of the first edition was “to open up these hidden riches for the Hebrew reader...in an ordered and concentrated form.”¹¹⁷ It is interesting to note that even though Tishby was Gershom Scholem's pupil and though *Mishnat Hazohar* reflects

¹¹² Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 240.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ A French translation was published in 1977: Isaiah Tishby, *La Kabbale: Anthologie du Zohar*, traduction française de I. Rouch (Paris: Berg International, 1977). In 1989, an English translation was published: Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: The Littman Library, 1989).

¹¹⁷ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, xxv.

Scholem's position regarding the Zohar to a great extent, the initiative for this project was not Scholem's but that of Fishel Lachover and Shmuel Abba Horodotzky.¹¹⁸ It must also be emphasized that *Mishnat HaZohar* is an anthology with the goal of presenting the teachings of the Zohar in an ordered and concentrated form, rather than offering the Hebrew reader a comprehensive translation of the Zohar, as Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag began to do at exactly the same time and which Hillel Zeitlin had planned to do previously. From this perspective, Tishby's project is close in nature – and completes – Bialik's cultural ingathering (*Kinus*) project, which aspired to collect and edit anthologies of the classics of Jewish literature in a Zionist, secular framework.¹¹⁹

Like Scholem, Tishby rejected other modern Zohar translations that were not written from an academic perspective. In a review of Zohar translations in the introduction to *Mishnat HaZohar*, Tishby wrote about Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg's translation: "Instead of clarifying the subject matter the translator's system forced him to mix up the parashiyot, and to chop up the passages into small pieces. The translation itself is unreliable."¹²⁰ On Zeitlin's translation: "Neither the translation nor the explanation fulfilled the hopes that Zeitlin raised. The original text was not corrected in the least and in many places the translation is inaccurate. Nor does the style match that of the Zohar. In his explanatory notes many matters are introduced that have nothing to do with the literal meaning of the Zohar."¹²¹ Tishby also criticized the English translation by Sperling, Simon and Levertoff, saying, "The translators did their work in good faith, but their lack of knowledge of kabbalistic doctrines led them into error from time to time." He invalidated de Pauly's translation into French as "full of dreadful mistakes and Christianizing falsifications", and he noted that Ernst Müller's translation "was effected with great care, but there are frequent mistakes in comprehension."¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid. According to Zeev Gries, it was Gershom Scholem who urged Bialik press to cancel their contract with Horodetzky, and persuaded Tishby to connect with Lachover to complete the project. Consequentially, Horodetzky sued the Bialik Institute, and they published his preface in a separate edition. See Zeev Gries, "Isaiah Tishby's Contribution to the study of the Zohar" (Hebrew), *Davar* 25.11.1994, 21; Jonatan Meir, "Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar," 154–55.

¹¹⁹ Meir, "Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar," 155.

¹²⁰ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, 125, note 611.

¹²¹ Ibid., note 610.

¹²² Ibid., 102–103.

Contemporary Academic Translations of the Zohar

Tishby's *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, was published in English in 1989 and earlier in French in 1977. In the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, additional anthologies of Zoharic articles in English, translated by scholars affiliated with academic institutions, were published¹²³: Daniel Matt's anthology, *The Book of Enlightenment* (1983),¹²⁴ which preceded his comprehensive translation project (to be discussed in the following); a (partial) translation of the *Secrets of the Letters* by Stephen Wald (1988)¹²⁵; a translation of the *Midrash ha-Neelam Ruth*, by Lawrence Englander and Herbert Bassler (1993)¹²⁶; a translation of eight Zoharic stories by Aryeh Wineman (1997)¹²⁷; a translation of *Zohar Lamentations* by Seth Brody (1999)¹²⁸; and translation of the *Sifra detzeniuta* by Pinchas Giller (2001) and Ronit Meroz (2016).¹²⁹

Alongside these anthologies and translations of specific Zoharic segments in English, in the late twentieth century two comprehensive projects of Zohar translations appeared – one in French the other in English – by academic scholars who based their translations on critical philological research. Charles Mopsik began a project of translating the Zohar into French in 1981 that went

¹²³ Besides the “academic” translations of the Zohar into English, in the second half of the twentieth century additional translations into English were published, including a second edition of Mather's translation edited by Dagbort D. Runes (Dagbort D. Runes, *The Wisdom of the Kabbalah* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957). An interesting translation is that of the *Sifra Detzeniuta* and the *Idrot* (done according to the original say the authors) by two engineers, who claimed that the anthropomorphic imagery of the texts is a description of a machine to produce manna. See George Sassoon and Rodney Dale, *The Kabbalah Decoded* (London: Duckworth, 1978). Another translation of the *Sifra Detzeniuta* and the *Idrot* (including the text called *Idra de-bei Mishkana*), is Roy. A. Rosenberg, *The Anatomy of God* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973).

¹²⁴ Daniel C. Matt, *The Book of Enlightenment* (Mahwa: Paulist Press, 1983); The translations were reprinted in Daniel .C Matt, *Zohar: Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, Paths publishing, 2002).

¹²⁵ Stephen G. Wald, *The Doctrine of the Divine Name, an Introduction to Classical Kabbalistic Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

¹²⁶ Lawrence A. Englander and Herbet W. Bassler, *The Mystical Study of Ruth* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

¹²⁷ Aryeh Weinman, *Mystic Tales from the Zohar* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹²⁸ Seth Brody, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and other kabbalistic commentaries* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publication, 1999), 153–206.

¹²⁹ Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158–69. (Giller also translated the portion known as *Idra debi Mashkana*. Ibid., 169–71); Ronit Meroz, “The Archeology of the Zohar: Sifra Ditseniuta as a Sample Text,” *DAAT* 82 (2016): xxv–xxxix. (The translation is of a shorter version of the text, found in Ms. Vatican 213.)

unfinished due to his untimely death in 2003.¹³⁰ Since 2003 Daniel Matt has been publishing a comprehensive translation into English, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*.¹³¹ Recently, Nathan Wolsky and Joel Hecker translated *Midrash ha-Neelam* portions of the Zohar in the framework of the Pritzker Edition.¹³² The detailed introductions to these translations, based on the research of Scholem and his pupils, summarize the academic research approach to the Zohar. Yet, these comprehensive Zohar projects present a different position than that of Scholem regarding the spreading of the Zohar and its place in modern culture. Both Matt and Mopsik prepared full translations of the Zohar, rather than anthologies of translated Zoharic articles. Despite the two scholars' use of academic methods and presentation of modern hermeneutic perspectives of the text, they do not view the Zohar as a historically valuable document suited mainly (or only) to research, but as a cultural resource bearing spiritual meaning for the modern reader. Scholem's ambivalent stance, discussed earlier, expressed both "admiration" and "disgust" for the Zohar. The translations of Mopsik and Matt were written out of veneration and esteem, mainly expressing "admiration" of the Zohar. This position, reminiscent of the approach in neo-romantic translations of the Zohar of the early twentieth century, is clearly expressed in Daniel Matt's introduction to the Pritzker Edition of the Zohar:

The Zohar's teachings are profound and intense...follow the words to what lies beyond and within; open the gates of imagination.... Above all, don't reduce everything you encounter in these pages to something you already know. Beware of trying to find "the essence" of a particular teaching...here essence is inadequate unless it stimulates you to explore ever deeper layers, to question your assumptions about tradition, God and self.¹³³

The words of introduction by Margot Pritzker (of the Jewish American multi-millionaire family), who initiated and sponsored Daniel Matt's translation project, perfectly illustrate its background, addressing a reader who seeks to rely on the authority of modern academic research, but who searches for spiritual meaning relevant to his or her life in the Zohar:

¹³⁰ Charles Mopsik, *Le Zohar*, vols. 1–4 (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1981–2000).

¹³¹ Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vols. 1–9 (Stanford University Press, 2003–2016).

¹³² Nathan Wolsky, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vol. 10 (Stanford University Press, 2016); Joel Hecker, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vol. 11 (Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹³³ Matt, *Zohar Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1, xxv–xxiv.

I wanted to be able to study the Zohar from an English translation that would draw upon the research and scholarship of the past half-century. I determined to sponsor such a translation... My family and I now present the Zohar to the English reading public, with the hope that the radiance that flows from this great work and from the Jewish mystical tradition will bring light to those who seek it.¹³⁴

As we will see in the following, during the period in which Matt began his project of translating the Zohar into English, Michael Berg and members of the Kabbalah Center were also working on an English translation. Although I do not believe that these were prepared in direct response to one another, their appearance in the same period reflects competition between different circles (academic scholars versus neo-Kabbalah practitioners) for control over the Zohar's cultural capital and its presentation to the English-speaking public.

The New Age of Zohar Translations

There has been extensive activity in translations of the Zohar in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Translations based on previous translations (including those by Jean de Pauly, Gershom Scholem, Azriel Nathan Frenk, Ernst Müller and Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag) have appeared in various languages including German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Hungarian, Polish, Russian and Japanese.¹³⁵ Several translations into Hebrew have been completed in recent decades by Jewish ultra-orthodox Kabbalists. Rabbi David

¹³⁴ Matt, *Zohar Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1, xiv.

¹³⁵ Translations into Rumanian (Carola Francisc, *Zoharul, cartea splendori, traducere din ebraica de Jean de Pauly, traducere în limba româna de Carola Francisc* (Bucuresti: Antet, 1997), and Spanish (Lenó Dujovne, *El Zohar*, vols. 1–5, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sigal, 1977–1978)) are based on that of de Pauly. For a translation into Dutch based on Müller's translation see Ernst Müller, *Zohar, Het Heilige boek van de Kabbalah*, vertaling G. J. van Lamoen (Deventer: Ankh-Hermes, 1982). For a Polish translation based on Franck's translation, see Azriel Nathan Frenk, *Opowiesci Zoharu, przelozyl z hebrajskiego, wstepem i komentarzem opatrzył I. Kania* (Krakow: Wydawn. Literackie, 1988). For a partial Russian translation based on Ashlag's Hebrew translation see: Efrem Bauch, *Zohar Parashat Pinchas*, Jerusalem 1995 (Еф. Бауха, Зоар, парашат Пинхас, Иерусалим 1995). The anthology of Zoharic articles in Hungarian is based, according to the title page, on translations by Müller and Mopsik, as well as the Ashlag translation and the Soncino translation of the Zohar into English. See Daniel Bíró and Peter Réti, *Zóhár: a ragyogás könyve* (Budapest: Holnap Kiado, 1990). Müller's *Der Zohar* was translated to Japanese in Ishimaru, Shoji, *Zoharu Kabara no seiten* (Hosei University Press, 2012). Previously, Mathers' *Kabbalah Unveiled* was translated in Handa, Itaru, *Beru wo nuida kabara* (Kokusho Kanko kai, 2000) (I am grateful to Shin'ichi Yoshinaga for this information). For translations into various languages based on Scholem's English translation, see footnote 109.

Shalom Batzri, head of the Kabbalistic Yeshiva “Hashalom”, and one of the prominent Kabbalists in Israel in recent years (known for his performance of a Dybbuk exorcism in 1999), collected, translated and edited the collection *Legends of the Zohar*, printed between 1981–1993. This collection was also translated into English, Spanish and French.¹³⁶ Alongside Batzri’s anthology (which includes articles perceived as *Peshat Zohar*) several comprehensive translations of the Zohar into Hebrew have recently come out. A translation of the Zohar is included in Rabbi Daniel Frisch’s anthology of Zohar commentaries, *Matok MiDvash*, published between 1986–1990.¹³⁷ In the introduction to the book, Frisch printed “An essay on the magnitude of importance of studying the book of Zohar and all the other secrets of the Torah in our time.”¹³⁸ In it, the traditional perceptions regarding the eschatological significance of studying the Zohar are repeated, as well as the notion that the Zohar contains words of morality and religious awe (Yirat Shamayim) which can also be learned by those who are not proficient in the Kabbalah.¹³⁹ A Hebrew translation of the Zohar was also included in the Zohar commentary of Yechiel Bar Lev, *Zohar with Yedid Nefesh Commentary*, published in 14 volumes between 1992–1999.¹⁴⁰ Another translation into Hebrew, without a commentary, was published in ten volumes in 1998 by *Yerid Hasefarim* publishing house.¹⁴¹ This translation was prepared by a team of scholars headed by Rabbi Shlomo Cohen, and includes an extensive introduction by Rabbi Yehuda Edri. In the introduction Edri engages in lengthy discussions of the authorship of the Zohar, the history of the Kabbalah, the structure of the Zohar, commentaries of the Zohar, and other subjects. He accepts the traditional position regarding the antiquity of the Zohar, and repeats the eschatological claim as a justification for the translation project.¹⁴² Shlomo Cohen stresses that he abstained from translating the *Idra Raba*, the *Idra Zuta* and *Sifra Ditznuta*, following the decree against the translation of these sections. It is possible that this emphasis serves

¹³⁶ David Shalom Batzri, *Tales of the Zohar*, 7 vols. (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1981–1993) (Hebrew); Idem, *Tales from the Zohar*, translated into English by Edward Levin (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1992); Idem, *Historias Del Zohar*, traducción, D. Litvak, (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1992); Idem, *Histoires du Zohar*, traduits en français par Y. Lederman, (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1993).

¹³⁷ Daniel Frisch, *Matok MiDvash*, vols. 1–4 (Jerusalem: Machon Da`at Yoseph, 1986–1990).

¹³⁸ Frisch, *Matok MiDvash*, vol. 1, 14–19.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴⁰ Yechiel Bar Lev, *Zohar with Yedid Nefesh Commentary*, vols. 1–14 (Petah Tikvah: n.p., 1992–1997)

¹⁴¹ *Sefer Hazohar*, 10 vols. (Jerusalem: Yerid Hasefarim, 1998).

¹⁴² Ibid., vol. 1, 20.

to distinguish the *Yerid Hasefarim* translation from that of Rabbi Ashlag, who included these sections in his translation.

In addition to translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, an anthology of Zoharic articles translated into English with commentary was prepared by Rabbi Moshe Miller, a member of the Habad Hasidic movement.¹⁴³ Moshe Miller published a comprehensive essay claiming the antiquity of the Zohar, in which he vehemently disagrees with the conclusions of the academic school of Scholem, Tishby and their ilk, but nevertheless relies on on academic studies from recent years (first and foremost those of Moshe Idel).¹⁴⁴

A more comprehensive translation of the Zohar into English was prepared by the largest neo-Kabbalistic movement, the Kabbalah Center. The translation, completed by Michael Berg, was published in twenty-three volumes between 1999–2003.¹⁴⁵ This edition is based on Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag's Hebrew translation and commentary, *Hasulam*. The edition begins with lengthy introductions by Philip Berg, the founder of the Kabbalah Center, and his son Michael, which present the neo-Kabbalistic ideas of their movement. The Bergs accept traditional Kabbalistic perceptions regarding the authenticity of the Zohar, its authority and its holiness, but they integrate these perceptions with typical New Age ideas. Accordingly, Michael Berg explains the purpose of his translation project based on the traditional perception that studying and spreading the Zohar will bring redemption closer, but as far as he is concerned redemption equals transformation to a higher level of global consciousness:

The following translation of the Zohar strives to open a door to the great cosmic mysteries for those who are genuinely interested in understanding the structure and laws of the universe. It is thus utterly vital for the spiritual and physical survival of humanity; and its teachings are designed to lead humanity to the days of the Mashiach, the long-prophesized return of the golden age, when peace, compassion, wisdom and love will prevail among people, when harmony will rule in the depths below as it does in the heights above. Such are the true goals of all metaphysical systems... Transformation of consciousness is the point, for from that comes the elevation of global consciousness, given our current condition, we cannot afford to ignore the gift of these Holy words any longer. It is time to change the world.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Moshe Miller, *Zohar Selections Translated and Annotated* (Morristown: Fiftieth Gate Publication, 2000).

¹⁴⁴ Moshe Miller, *The Authenticity of the Zohar*. http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380763/jewish/Other-Claims-and-Responses-Continued.htm (accessed 15.11.2016).

¹⁴⁵ Michael Berg, *The Zohar by Shimon Bar Yochai with the Sulam commentary*, 23 vols. (New York: Kabbalah Center International, 1999–2003).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, lxxvii.

In his introduction, Philip Berg ties the spreading of the Zohar to the arrival of the New Age of Aquarius:

The critical moment of change would arrive in conjunction with the Aquarian Age... The Aquarian influence will be a subtle force that will permit the gradual spread of the Holy Grail until it becomes an integral force of humankind.¹⁴⁷

Differing from traditional Kabbalists and modern Jewish translators of the Zohar, who underline the “Jewish” nature of the Zohar as a religious or national text, Philip Berg emphasizes the universalist nature of the Zohar (an emphasis reminiscent of the Christian Kabbalistic and occultist approach): “The entire world will come to understand that the holy Zohar, which ushered in the second revelation, was intended for all humankind.”¹⁴⁸ This emphasis is expressed by adopting a Christian term, “the Holy Grail”, as another name for the Zohar. In a segment integrating New Age astrological perceptions, Berg asserts that the publication of the “Holy Grail” in its entirety will allow the attraction of positive astral influence in the world (by means of reading-scanning the Zohar) and will lead to the elimination of chaos from our lives:

To address these influences, which can at times be positive or negative, the Holy Grail was assigned the task of tapping these positive influences and eliminate (sic) the negative influences. Each year brings with it a host of different influences. Nevertheless, the scanning-reading charts that will become available after the publishing of the entire Holy Grail, will assign the appropriate section of the Holy Grail to each and every week in any given year. Thus, the practitioner will have at his/her fingertips the relevant and timely connecting-section towards the elimination of chaos from our lives.¹⁴⁹

Like many others who translated the Zohar, Michael Berg criticizes and invalidates the previous translations of the Zohar into English. He speaks out against abridged editions (probably referring to the Soncino Edition) and against the anthologies that came out in English:

Those who think they are familiar with the text, from often highly abridged editions or ones that assemble aphorisms into subject categories, will invariably find this edition utterly different from what they have been accustomed to thinking of as the Zohar. The other works are best viewed as being like the trailers one sees

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., xxviii.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., xxv.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., xx–xxi.

long before the actual movie arrives: and like many trailers they have created an entirely misleading impression of what they were supposed to represent faithfully.¹⁵⁰

Berg claims that he intentionally refrains from writing an academic interpretation of the Zohar. His objection is directed against academic translators such as Daniel Matt, who began his translation project in the same period. Berg's words highlight the competition over the growing cultural capital of the Zohar between neo-Kabbalists and academic scholars of Kabbalah:

Those involved with producing this edition were faced with the question of whether to present it in a formal academic manner – with footnotes, scholarly digressing on linguistic matters, and so on – or to offer it to the world in a form as simple and unadorned as possible, so that its purpose would remain solely what it always has been: to bring light where formerly there was none. We chose the latter course, since providing material for yet more obscure treaties on metaphysical theology serves no real purpose, but it does betray the real purpose of the Zohar.¹⁵¹

Conclusion

The various translations of the Zohar reviewed in this article were created in different historical, social and political contexts and were written from diverse theological and ideological standpoints and hermeneutical perspectives. For all the translations of the Zohar that have been and continue to be created over the generations, there is one common denominator – the desire to spread it among audiences who are unable to read it in its original format. The various translations, however, differ from one another in the reader-audience they address, in the choice of Zoharic material translated, in the reasons used to justify the translation and in the ideological, political and economic factors that stimulated and enabled the various translation projects.

In several cases, common ideological factors stand behind translations done in different languages. Thus, Sabbatean ideology motivated eighteenth-century Zohar translations into Yiddish and Ladino, with Sabbatean circles also possibly involved in Latin translations of the period. During the Renaissance and the Baroque period, and in the modern era as well, Christian Kabbalists, converted Jews and missionaries translated Zoharic articles into Latin, German, French and Yiddish. Theosophical and occultist circles translated the Zohar

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., lxxiii.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., lxxi.

into English and French at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Jewish scholars affiliated with these circles translated Zoharic articles into Arabic and German. At the outset of the twentieth century, Jewish scholars affiliated with neo-romantic and Zionist circles translated the Zohar into German, Hebrew, Yiddish and English. Various English, French and Hebrew translations were written in the twentieth and twenty-first century from an academic perspective, based on a historical-philological research approach. Other translations in Hebrew and English were done during this same period by contemporary Jewish Kabbalists, using traditional and neo-Kabbalistic approaches.

The various theological and ideological perspectives from which the Zohar translations were created, as well as the diverse audiences they were intended for, formed the nature and scope of the different translations. Some chose to translate particular sections of the Zohar. Others created anthologies of translated Zoharic articles, which were chosen by different criteria. Christian Kabbalists like Sommer and Norellius chose to translate Zoharic articles that, according to their understanding, conveyed Christian conceptions. Traditional Jewish Kabbalistic circles generally chose to translate articles considered *Peshat Zohar*, mainly anecdotes and moral stories. The more comprehensive translations written by Jews in the twentieth century, for example the Soncino translation in English and the *Yerid Hasefarim* in Hebrew, also refrained from translating the most esoteric units of the Zohar, such as the *Idrot* and *Sifra Detzniuta*. In fact, it was exactly these esoteric parts that were translated by Sabbateans into Ladino and by the Christian Kabbalist, Knorr von Rosenroth, into Latin. Following von Rosenroth, these texts became central in occultist circles at the turn of the nineteenth century. In contrast, the modern anthologies of Zoharic articles that have been written from an academic perspective are generally divided according to subjects that reflect the categories according to which academic research of Kabbalah is carried out.

There was often competition between the different ideological circles behind the Zohar translation projects over the cultural capital (and sometimes the economic gains) that Zohar translation provided. The more the fame of the Zohar and its value as a cultural commodity increased in communities that were unable to read it in its original tongue, the more competition between various groups around the control of translation and distribution of the Zohar increased as well. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, “In fact, analysis of the fields of cultural production shows that, whether among theatre and film critics or political journalists, whether in the intellectual field or the religious field,

producers produce not, or not so much as people think, by reference to their audience, but by reference to their competitors.”¹⁵² To a great extent this is true regarding the field of Zohar translations, especially in the modern era. As we have seen in this review, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century great interest in the Kabbalah arose among Western esoteric circles in Europe and the United States. In this context various Zohar translations were created in European languages, most of which were based on Knorr von Rosenroth’s Latin translation of the Zohar. It may well be that the appearance of these translations encouraged the writing of Zohar translations in German and later in English by Jewish translators that were mostly based on the Aramaic original. These translations drew critique from Gershom Scholem and his disciples, who claimed that they did not adhere to rigorous academic standards. The academic scholars created translations in Hebrew, German and English that deployed historical and philological tools. The competition over the cultural capital of the Zohar also encouraged the creation of Zohar translations in Jewish Kabbalistic circles. It seems that it is not a coincidence that Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag’s translation project was created during the same period in which Tishby’s comprehensive anthology was published.

In the late twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century interest in the Zohar and the Kabbalah is growing in many circles, resulting in intensive Zohar translation activity, mostly English, French and Hebrew. As we saw, three new translations of the Zohar in Hebrew have appeared in the past few decades (by Daniel Frish, Yechiel Bar Lev and Shlomo Cohen), which were all created in orthodox circles. In my opinion, the appearance of these translations should be regarded as a response to the intensive spreading of the interpretation of *Hasulam* by neo-Kabbalistic groups, mainly the Kabbalah Center (and recently the Bnei Baruch group). The appearance of two new comprehensive translations of the Zohar into English in the past few years, the Pritzker Edition by Daniel Matt and Michael Berg’s translation for the Kabbalah Center (as well as Moshe Mille’s partial translation) was stimulated by competition for the growing English readership interested in Kabbalah. The increasing popularity of the Kabbalah and the Zohar amongst Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, and the fact that very few circles today are able to read it in its original form, promises the appearance of additional Zohar translations in the future.

¹⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 165.

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Book Reviews

Kennet Granholm. *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. xi+226 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-27486-0. \$133.00

Dark Enlightenment should be seen as an important touchstone in the next generation of works coming from the primarily European and specifically Continental schools of Western esotericism research. Until recently, the field of Western esotericism has struggled with the problems and boundaries of ethnography, and how to navigate the sometimes murky spaces of practice and scholarship. While Wouter Hanegraaff has argued that scholars in this field need to be more open to and embrace ethnographic approaches,¹ the reality is that the historical emphasis on text, and the history of intellectual currents within the field has, in practice, caused a somewhat strained relationship with practitioners.² In *Dark Enlightenment*, Granholm addresses this situation through not only his own ethnographic practice, but also by presenting challenges and areas of expansion to the emerging field of Western esoteric studies.

The title of the book does cover more ground than the content. The book is centered on a single magical order, the Stockholm based Dragon Rouge of which Granholm is a member and initiate, and which also formed the basis of Granholm's doctoral research. Within the study of Western esotericism, this type of practitioner ethnography is quite rare, although the treatment is more

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse," *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 252–73.

² Amy Hale, "Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs. Esoteric Studies," *The Pomegranate* 15, no. 1–2 (2013) 151–63.

common in allied fields such as Pagan Studies. Pagan Studies ethnographies, however, frequently focus tightly on the methods of reflexive ethnography, so much so that the reader may get the sense that this is primarily a tactic to legitimize the study, in addition to being sound ethnographic practice. While certainly reflexive, Granholm's work seems to make no apology for either the legitimacy of his subject matter or his approach, which is quite refreshing.

Dark Enlightenment starts by presenting a summary of approaches to Western esotericism. In this section Granholm centers in on discourse analysis, an approach also favored by Kocku von Stuckrad,³ which takes as its central method the ways in which knowledge, history, identities and relationships are constructed and influenced by social relations and conditions of power. While this approach is not novel, its explicit adoption in the study of Western esotericism is a useful counterpoint to historically based studies which are promoting truth claims, thus characterizing what has been termed by Hanegraaff and others a "religionist" approach to esotericism.⁴

The second section of *Dark Enlightenment* is a quick historical overview of what Granholm terms "Post Enlightenment," mostly nineteenth and twentieth century esoteric groups and ideas which provided the primary inspiration and context for Dragon Rouge. It includes short sections on Theosophy, the "Occult Revival" of nineteenth century Britain and France, the *Ordo Templi Orientis* and the impact of Aleister Crowley, the rise of Neopaganism, contemporary Satanism, and the New Age movement of the 1960s. The purpose of this wide ranging section is to establish certain historical, symbolic and ritual threads, and to identify the centrality of the discourses which impacted Dragon Rouge, not to provide a comprehensive account of any of these groups or movements. While the knowledgeable reader might like to see a bit more usage of primary source material in this section, it is also evident that this overview needed to be kept concise.

In the third, fourth and fifth sections of the book, Granholm presents his ethnographic work with Dragon Rouge, and explores the ways in which certain practices and motivations of the order are shaped by broader discourses within contemporary and historical Western esotericism. Granholm's depiction of Dragon Rouge is of a very different type of order than highly structured

³ Kocku von Stuckrad, "Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations: Tracing the Religious and the Esoteric in Secular Culture," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 226–43.

⁴ Wouter Hanegraaff, "Teaching Experiential Dimensions of Esotericism," in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William B. Parsons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 154–70.

groups like the Golden Dawn or the O.T.O., with a curriculum designed for individuation rather than strict adherence to a “current” or ritual structure. Granholm does a fine job of characterizing the ways in which Dragon Rouge intersects with and departs from the influences and practices of what we can consider the contemporary Western ritual magic traditions that emerge from Freemasonry, although I am not convinced that Dragon Rouge is as antinomian as Granholm argues. However, this is how Dragon Rouge practitioners characterize themselves, and as such there is useful and interesting discussion in these sections of the book about the relationship of the discourses of tradition and authenticity to efficacy and personal growth within this framework. In any case, this part of the book really stands apart in its beautiful, rich description of some of the moments in Granholm’s own journey with Dragon Rouge.

Dark Enlightenment, however, does suffer from a traditional problem that plagues a number of ethnographic studies: a lack of emphasis on historicity and historical currents, particularly in places that would have benefitted from some theoretical development. Historical context is essential to providing the necessary background for the discourses and social constructions under consideration. For instance, the Dragon Rouge approach to and construction of “nature” and the “natural world” need some expansion. This topic has relevance not only for the study of contemporary and modern Paganisms, but also for understanding anyone who is trying to impact their sense of agency through the manipulation of the “natural” world, which may be the driving impulse behind both high ritual and folk magic. A closer examination of the position of the Dragon Rouge magician in relationship to historical ideas about nature and the natural would have provided some useful context for this central point of Dragon Rouge practice and worldview, and would have supported the wider discourse analytical framework. Furthermore, the general discussion of modern Western “Left Hand Path” traditions could have benefitted from a short contextualizing section on the impact of Tantra in the history of modern occultism.

A wider consideration of historical Tantra, in addition to an exploration, however brief, of the history of the divine feminine and magical revolutionary ideologies, might also have helped to flesh out the sections on gender and feminism in this study. From Granholm’s reporting, the role of the divine feminine is key to understanding the theoretical underpinnings of Dragon Rouge’s “dark magic.” Yet, the construction of “the feminine” in this context and its impact on both the women and men of the order seems under-problematized. Striking a balance between taking respondents’ understanding

of their experience at face value, while also unpacking the wider historical and cultural context which shapes and informs those experiences, is the tricky pivot point on which the ethnographer sits. I feel as though the respondents' conclusions about gender and transgression here, especially when some of the portrayals of gender in Dragon Rouge settings can be read as quite normative, might have benefitted from some challenges from the ethnographer. To be fair, Granholm notes this in an afterword as an area which could have been expanded, and also comments on the overall need to address gender issues in the field of Western esotericism.

It is in the final chapter regarding modernity that *Dark Enlightenment* shows its real strength. Here, Granholm provides some fine critique of the central tropes of disenchantment, modernity and secularization that have become the cornerstones of much of the theoretical academic production in Western esoteric studies, and instead suggests that the territory of these spaces is far murkier than previous analysis suggests. Granholm argues that contemporary Western esotericism is not characterized as much by secularization and a response to disenchantment, but rather the relationship of the individual to religious institutions and orthodoxy, and argues that the hallmark of modern esotericism is eclecticism. It is worth noting, though, that while the Golden Dawn and Theosophy may through our modern lenses look highly eclectic, they themselves saw the drawing together of disparate symbols and traditions as evidence of their perennialism and their connection with a genuine, universal and enduring "Tradition." What to us today looks like creative *bricolage* was to practitioners of Theosophy and the Golden Dawn the discovery of a coherent and revealed universal wisdom tradition, the construction of which was deeply informed by discourses of colonialism. What Granholm accomplishes in this section is a challenge to any attempts to reduce or define the essential condition of esotericism in the West as many scholars have attempted to do. He reminds us that the contexts and meanings of esoteric texts and practices are ever shifting, and perhaps it is ethnography that best uncomfortably exposes those gray areas.

Dark Enlightenment brings a lot to the table. I want to applaud Granholm's openness and approach, but I think that it is also worth appreciating the openness of Thomas Karlsson (the group's founder) and other Dragon Rouge members in working with Granholm and letting him publish about the order with such rich and compelling description. Granholm's own beautifully candid responses to his experiences were also a breath of fresh air from a field that frequently prides itself on keeping a safe distance from the subject, and there

is hope that this may pave the way for more in-depth studies. Much of the reticence about dealing with occult practitioners stems from a combination of fear, secrecy and even a level of scholarly ridicule of Western esoteric and occult practices. It can also be difficult to gain access to contemporary practitioners as many of them have taken oaths of secrecy. Practitioner scholars are rightfully concerned about the professional impact of their own experiences and involvement, which in my view has led to a lack of reflexivity and honesty in many studies of modern occult groups and movements. Additionally, the amount of correspondence and notes held by private collectors in personal archives greatly restricts access to important texts which could provide deeper insight into the nature and context of many modern esoteric practices. Hopefully *Dark Enlightenment* will help pave the way for better research conditions and help to secure the legitimacy of these studies and bring Western esoteric practices and practitioners ever so slightly more into the light.

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Abraham von Worms. *The Book of Abramelin: A New Translation*. Compiled and edited by Georg Dehn. Translated by Steven Guth. Foreword by Lon Milo DuQuette. Lake Worth: Ibis Press, 2015.

An important but overlooked figure in contemporary scholarship on Western esotericism is Abraham von Worms, a 14th- to early 15th-century Jewish Kabbalist whose writings in translated form were extraordinarily instrumental to the formulation of the concept of the “Holy Guardian Angel” (HGA) in modern occultism. The compelling narrative that Abraham von Worms expounds in his writings, whether ultimately fiction or not, provides an unrivaled window into the magical “scene” of medieval Europe. It also takes the reader on a quest that extends to modern Turkey, Israel, and Palestine. It is in the Egyptian village of Araki, however, that Abraham von Worms meets a hermit named Abramelin who expounds to him a practical system of magical retirement for the purpose of invoking one’s “Angel” (*Dein Engel* in the original German, lit. “thine Angel”). Once the Angel is invoked, the magician is then instructed to evoke the four princes (*Oberfürsten*) of the “unredeemed spirits” (*böse Geister*) who are subjected to his or her will. These princes and their servitors are thus issued commands by means of a cognitively complex process of visual mnemonics — the famous “magic squares” of Abramelin.¹

The publishing quality of this edition rivals books published on the academic market (despite a handful of spelling and punctuation errors), and Steven Guth’s translations of the four books that together comprise the work are clear and concise. Helpful visual referents are scattered throughout the text, including historical illustrations of several of the characters that Abraham von Worms assists in his narrative (e.g. Kaiser Sigismund and Frederick I, Elector of Brandenburg). Period maps are also provided, as well as numerous scans of actual manuscript folios and even some original images of the magic squares. No less than four appendices written by the editor Georg Dehn have been added: a memoir of his own journeys in search of Araki, his argument as to the historical identity of Abraham von Worms as Jacob HaLevy (the MaHaRil), his attempt to determine the actual geographical location of Araki, and his

¹ For one possible method of disassembling this unique ritual technology with its associative correspondences, see Egil Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Religion* 46.2 (2015): 173–75.

comparative tabulation of variants in the lists of the names of the spirits. These appendices have been substantially reorganized from the first Ibis Press edition so as to allow the material to integrate with Dehn's forthcoming book *The Gnosis of Abramelin*. Although Dehn convincingly argues that the frame story contains historical elements, there is still no conclusive evidence to prove whether or not Abraham von Worms actually existed, as it seems for instance equally plausible that he could have been a narrative mouthpiece for a magical community such as the 17th-century Rosicrucian authors of the *Fama Fraternitas*, with knowledge both of 15th-century political leaders in Europe and of Jewish Kabbalah.

This is what makes the philological history of the work equally as compelling as its narrative and historical religious content, and on this point Georg Dehn's editing and Steven Guth's translation are highly valuable to scholars and practitioners alike. This edition is an English translation of Dehn's original German publication, which is itself composed from several surviving manuscripts, none of which date later than the beginning of the 17th century.² In preparing the German publication Dehn utilized what he believed were the earliest two extant manuscripts, composed in German and bearing the date 1608 (Codex Guelfibus 10.1 and 47.13, held by the Library of Duke August in Wolfenbüttel). He also consulted two other German manuscripts in the Dresden library, as well as a later manuscript composed in Hebrew (MS.OPP.594 at Oxford's Bodleian Library). This later manuscript had also been examined by Gershom Scholem, who believed it to be a translation from German, and Dehn had the manuscript re-translated into German by Rabbi Salomon Siegl to help him prepare this edition. Dehn also consulted the rare first published version of this work, released under the pseudonym Peter Hammer in Cologne in 1725 and known to the members of *Fraternitas Saturni*, a German offshoot of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*.³ Although Dehn's edition does not contain an apparatus criticus, variants in the MS are cited often and it is clear there was much attention to detail in preparing the edition from multiple sources. By contrast, the occultist S.L. MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918) of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn used a late mid-

² Georg Dehn, *Büch Abramelin* (Leipzig: Edition Araki, 2001).

³ Peter Hammer, *Die ägyptischen grossen Offenbarungen, in sich begreifend die aufgefundenen Geheimnissbücher Mosis; oder des Juden Abraham von Worms Buch der wahren Praktik in der uralten göttlichen Magie und in Erstaunlichen Dingen, wie sie durch die heilige Kabbala und durch Elohyim mitgetheilt worden : Samt der Geister- und Wunder-Herrschaft, welches Moses in der Wüste aus dem feurigen Busch erlernet, alle Verborgenenheiten der Kabbala umfassend* (Köln am Rhein, 1725).

19th century French manuscript held by the Bibliothèque d’Arsenal in Paris to publish his influential English translation of the text.⁴ This version of the text has been in print ever since and is the most common English-language edition, causing the technical terms “Operation” and “Holy Guardian Angel” (whom Guth renders as “Guardian Angel” based off of the German *Engel*) to be forever inscribed in the history-books of Western occultism. The variety of sources posed several translation issues for Steven Guth as well, who felt compelled to translate the German *Herr* to “Adonai” rather than French *Seigneur* to “Lord” in Mathers’s edition. It is not said how the Hebrew translation of the German original rendered the word for God.

Despite Mathers’s zeal in translating, his French exemplar only included three out of the four books in the Codex Guelfibus and all other manuscripts (it omits a colorful book of “natural” spells and alchemical recipes that Dehn’s revised edition translates in full). It also reduced the length of Abramelin’s prescribed magical retirement from a year and a half to six months, and failed to correctly replicate all of the magic squares. Despite these idiosyncrasies, Mathers’s text was the standard edition for virtually an entire century until Georg Dehn’s *Büch Abramelin*. This meant that prior to Dehn’s published German edition and Guth’s English translations, earlier versions of the work were really only accessible to those who either possessed the rare Peter Hammer edition or who had access to early modern manuscript collections in several different libraries across Europe. Dehn’s new edition therefore demonstrates conclusively that Mathers’s English translation, while a true classic of Western esotericism that would go on to greatly inform the magical career of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and numerous other 20th century occult authors, was ultimately based on an inferior textual exemplar.⁵

Despite this fact, Lon Milo DuQuette in his Foreword and Georg Dehn in his Editor’s Note to the Second Revised Edition encourage readers not be too hard on Mathers — or Crowley — given the limitations of their source materials. While this sympathy is a nice gesture towards modern practitioners, I felt that a deeper examination of the way that Crowley implemented Abramelin’s instructions would have strengthened their case. For example, the A.:A.: (the magical order that Crowley co-founded with George Cecil Jones following the schism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn) assigns instructions for the attainment of the “Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian

⁴ *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage* (London: John M. Watkins, 1900).

⁵ Mathers’s French textual exemplar was later published with an introduction as *La magie sacrée d’Abramelin le mage*, ed. Robert Ambelain (Paris: Niclus, 1959).

Angel” to the Grade of Adeptus Minor.⁶ It is easy to miss the fact, however, that the official A.:A.: instruction for this task (the “Vision of the Eighth Æthyr,” also known as “Liber VIII”) was not pulled verbatim from Mathers’s faulty edition of the Abramelin text but was penned during Crowley’s scrying of the 8th (Enochian) Æthyr with Victor Neuberg while traveling across the Sahara Desert in 1909. This newer instruction was published as part of “The Vision & the Voice,” a supplement to *The Equinox* volume 1, no. 5, and prescribes a retirement period of ninety-one days instead of either the six months of Mathers’s edition or the eighteen months of Dehn’s exemplar.⁷ It also contains other significant variations on Abramelin’s instructions that appear to be specific to the A.:A.: system of initiation.⁸ In any event, Crowley’s (and also Mathers’s, but to a different degree) motivation was not always to “restore” an original ritual text, but to adapt it in such a way that it would fit the curriculum for his students. Modern magicians stand in a long tradition of innovation with regards to older ritual manuals — this was happening in the Middle Ages also. The noted discrepancies in Abramelin’s instructions are therefore not as problematic as would be the case if Crowley’s rendition was lifted directly from the Mathers edition.

Given the recent impetus for examining traditional magical texts more thoroughly through the lenses of cognitive science and Western esotericism, Dehn’s edition in any case will certainly not disappoint. All in all, much credit should be given to Dehn and Guth for a well-executed series of new editions on the Abramelin text that can potentially open up the world of Abraham von Worms to a wider audience of scholars and practitioners of esoteric traditions.

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⁶ “Liber XIII,” in vol. 1, no. 3 of *The Equinox* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1910).

⁷ For an edited version of this text, see *The Vision & the Voice, with Commentary and Other Papers* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1998).

⁸ See the works by author J. Daniel Gunther for the present way in which this initiatory framework, including the invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel, is applied in practice.

Henrik Bogdan and Jan A.M. Snoek, eds. *Handbook of Freemasonry*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. xx + 669 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-21833-8.

The amount of publications dealing with Freemasonry is startling, usually approaching the phenomenon either thematically, or in a purely encyclopedic fashion. *Handbook of Freemasonry* proves to be something completely different – a handbook for consultation – with contributions from no less than twenty-seven scholars extensively and profoundly discussing and circling this more than three hundred year old tradition of initiatory societies. *Handbook of Freemasonry* consists of five slightly overlapping thematic parts: history, religion, sociology, politics, and culture. Each part is further sub-divided into thirty chapters, excluding the introduction, thus creating a wide range of entrances to explore and analyze the complexity of this initiatory society and its ambient contexts.

The first section (Chapters 2–8) deals with historical perspectives and provides the foundation for the following parts. Jan A.M. Snoek and Henrik Bogdan (chapter 2) set out the history of Freemasonry in a brief but lucid and comprehensive fashion, drawing the architectural blueprint, so to speak, for the forthcoming reading. This chapter covers a wide range of origin, content and development, areas that are to be expanded and further developed in the following chapters. The first part also treats the so-called *Old Charges* (chapter 3) – the supposed link between medieval stonemasons and Enlightenment Freemasonry – especially through the *Regius* (early 1400s) and *Cook* (early-mid 1400s) manuscripts. Andrew Prescott stresses the importance of comparative studies regarding such guild documents in Europe. This is a good point, since it would widen the perspective on the origin of Freemasonry from the discussion of Scottish or English origins, and shed light on why the initiatory society was born on British soil. Prescott's section foreshadows this polemical origin debate (Scotland vs. England), which expands in the following two chapters.

Chapters four and five unfold two different ideas of where to place the origin. David Stevenson argues for Scotland, mainly leaning on the William Schaw "*statutes*" (1598, 1599), while Matthew D.J. Scanlan places the origin in England. He stresses a methodological flaw: the tendency to misinterpret commonly used terms, such as "freemason", with the consequence that entire arguments are based on misconceptions of the true meanings and importance of the terms involved. Scanlan concludes his chapter by dismantling the term

in question, which is contextualized and reinterpreted in order to prove his thesis of Freemasonry's English origin. Both scholars present well-argued evidence for their respective positions; however, though the discussion of where to situate the first Freemasonic lodges is of historical interest, the question is always at risk of coming down to prestige. In my opinion, considering that building guilds similar to the British ones also existed on the Continent, the question of origin becomes far more interesting in a broader European perspective, calling for comparative studies between documents, contexts and milieus that bear resemblance to the English ones.

The remaining chapters explicate the Masonic adoption of templarism and chivalry, and by extension the development of "High Degrees", and also explore Freemasonry's role in the Enlightenment by using Benjamin Franklin as a case study. Part one concludes with a short chapter on Masonic historiography, tracing the history and development of the study of Freemasonry.

The second section (chapters 9–16) centers on a religious theme, dealing with the often complicated relationship between Freemasonry and specific religious traditions. The chapters cover Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Eastern religions, closing with the influence of Western esotericism and new religious movements. We are shown various accusations against Freemasonry, which in many cases were based on the secrecy with which Masons were considered to be cloaking themselves, not uncommonly giving rise to conspiracy theories. Such accusations are discussed alongside various notions of Freemasonry, in diverse phases and milieus, at times ascribed an antagonistic role and occasionally intermingled with the other religious traditions in question. The chapters in this second part of the volume work well together, seeming to collectively build up a dynamic, fluid narrative that lends fluency to the reading.

The religious theme culminates with Robert Jan van Pelt's intriguing contribution concerning liaisons between Freemasonry and Judaism (chapter 12). This complex and often wrongly understood relationship is outlined in a lucid fashion, with consideration of both traditional influences and conspiracy theories. In this section Pelt discusses religious, social, political, and apocalyptic aspects of the (real and imagined) connection between Judaism and Freemasonry. He initially deals with the complexity, and by extension difficulty, of interpreting influences and transfers between traditions: "If we find Old Testament themes in, for example Freemasonry, then we must follow the chain of influence in proper order, moving from the closest relation to the most remote." (189) By following these traces, van Pelt concludes that the content from the Old Testament that found its way into Freemasonry is derived from

the King James Bible rather than the Tanakh. Overall, the extensive chapter on Freemasonry and Judaism is one of the volume's pinnacles – on its own it will attract many readers to the *Handbook*. However, it might have been interesting to see a chapter in this section dedicated to conspiracy theories about Freemasonry alone, thereby opening up a discussion of phenomena such as the Illuminati.

Moving away from conventional religious traditions and their relation to Freemasonry, chapter 15 explicates the influence of Western esotericism on Freemasonry, exploring particular discourses and currents to explain the transfer of esoteric traits into Masonic structures. Treating concepts of initiation and esoteric knowledge, Bogdan emphasizes “the experience *and interpretation* of the ritual [as] the esoteric message,” (282) further connecting it to a transmutative effect upon the initiate in a way that is consistent with his underlying idea of *gnosis* as both intellectual and experiential knowledge.¹ The chapter continues to display how esoteric traits intermingle and become embedded mainly in the “High Degrees,” even though the influence varies considerably between different systems (Rites) and degrees, as well as particular times and locations, in order to define Freemasonry as typified by initiatory rather than secret organizations.

Part three (chapters 17–21) focuses on sociological traits, including the inner structures of Freemasonry (i.e. initiation, rites and systems) and compares them with other societies. Snoek's initial piece (chapter 17) on rituals of initiation as an instrumental part of Freemasonry is not only neat and expositive, but also illustrative of how the volume's chapters are interconnected, as his discussion contains links to chapters on historical and esoteric content. Within the thematic framework of sociology, Kristiane Hasselmann (chapter 18) provides us with a section on the boundary to psychology, examining the idea of the “nature of Masonic rituals as specific *practices of the self*?” (329) Her focus is on how English “gentlemen Freemasonry” adopts a new philosophy aimed at shaping a performative *habitus*, which in turn refines the lodge members morally and spiritually and modifies their patterns of behavior. Unfortunately, her text and interesting analysis are weighted down by a large amount of (often heavy) quotations, which is a pity since the theory and the arguments are of great value.

Arturo de Hoyos (chapter 19) guides us through the rise and development of different Masonic Rites and systems, in a chapter that treats administrative or governmental authority regarding initiation or instruction. Describing and explaining some of the separate forms of rite that came into existence, and

¹ Bogdan, Henrik, “New Perspectives on Western Esotericism,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 3 (2010): 97–105; Bogdan, Henrik, “Introduction: Modern Western Magic,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 12, no. 1 (2012): 1–16.

covering various times and places, Hoyos creates a much-needed ‘Rite-map,’ sorting out the complexities of diverse Masonic systems.

Despite the well laid out elucidation of Masonic rites in this section, at least two further developments would have made it even stronger. The Swedish Rite is presented, although a more profound treatment would have been interesting considering the system’s unique stance in only accepting Christianity as a foundation, more or less excluding the concept of the “Great Architect” that is more inclusive of Judaic and Islamic interpretations. Also, given the complexity of Freemasonry’s inner structure and hierarchies, together with the Rites and Systems, a couple of diagrams would have created additional clarity.

The penultimate part imbricates with the preceding section and presents a socio-political theme dealing with Freemasonry’s relation to feminism, race, colonialism, and adjoining issues like nationalism and war. The section opens with the role of women in Freemasonry (chapter 22). We are told that in addition to the existence of Adoption Freemasonry (c. 1774), quite a large number of mixed orders were created from the mid-1700s onwards – partly as a result of the emergence of “quasi-masonic” orders – with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1887) as a prime example. In this chapter – “Freemasonry and Women” – Snoek portrays Adoption Freemasonry not as anti-feminist, but as a part of the progress of feminism. He emphasizes this Masonic movement as “a form of women’s emancipation *avant la lettre*,” (411) thus arguing that the female orders preceded rather than mirrored feminism. He provides us with an outline of the manner of female participation in Masonic orders, and describes how they obtained creative control over the handling and workings of Masonic rituals.

The issue of nationalism (chapter 25) and Freemasonry is treated by Jeffrey Tyssens. Basing his argument on discourse theory, he cautions against presuming that identities are fixed categories. The fraternity is examined as a historical agent used by both pro- and counter-nationalistic movements, “a kind of ideological palimpsest where different identity projects have been written one over the other.” (463) Thus, Freemasonry both promotes national cohesion and works as a bridge between nations by forming new identity patterns.

The concluding part (chapters 27–31) places Freemasonry within culture and art, starting with music and closing with material culture. Part five also considers subjects such as literature, primarily the literature *of* Freemasonry, modern art and architecture. Marijo Ariëns-Volker (chapter 29) connects the fraternity to modern art, emphasizing the fact that Freemasonry has always been attractive to artists. The chapter illuminates the interconnected traits between different schools of art and Masonry. We are guided through

Romanticism and Martinism and related persons and currents, in connection with a somewhat esoteric Masonic context, and the transfer of ideas between these various domains. It should be mentioned that despite starting off with Freemasonry, a great part of this chapter deals with occult currents closely related to various Masonic offshoots, such as Martinès de Pasqually's *Ordre des Chevaliers Maçons Elus Cohen*.

The penultimate chapter connects to the volume's first chapter. James Stevens Curl's research on Freemasonry and architecture outlines the tools of the stonemason and how they are connected both to architecture and the speculative aspects of the craft. The chapter concentrates on "the more subtle aspects that suggest a Masonic thread," (560) ignoring buildings where the Masonic aspect is no more than a representation of a symbol. It is a perspicuous presentation of Masonry's relation to architecture, including historical traits and various styles, as well as both indoor and outdoor designs with Masonic overtones. Curl returns to his initial exposition and wraps up the chapter with quite a harsh assault on modernity, especially concerning architecture.

The volume brings together eminent scholars on Freemasonry and the articles are generally commendable, both in terms of the historical data they bring to light and in terms of their analyses. The book's form is itself a piece of grand architecture – the initial chapters create solid ground which permits the latter chapters to unfold more chiseled details. The chapters mutually enhance each other, as do the thematic parts, and are conjoined in a logical fashion; the consonance in content and composition reveals a firm and proficient editorial hand. It is hard to criticize the *Handbook of Freemasonry* on account of its content without nitpicking – the omissions discussed previously are the only drawbacks of this tidy, well-balanced volume.

These minor objections notwithstanding, the volume is strongly recommended to both scholars specialized in the field of Freemasonry and those focusing either on cultural studies or the history of religions in general. To sum up, the volume contributes significantly to the understanding of Freemasonry with its diverse entries and points of focus. The *Handbook of Freemasonry* likely qualifies as the most significant work to have been published on Freemasonry in recent years, and will be a source of great importance for years to come, both in terms of its theoretical developments and as a reliable source for consultation.

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Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas, eds. *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011. viii + 368 pp. ISBN: 978-3-16-150644-4. Cloth €109. ISBN 978-3-16-151859-1. eBook PDF €109,00

The title of *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* leaves more to the imagination than one might suppose at first glance, given the vast and fascinating terrain it seeks to map. The book is a set of revised papers from a conference held at Princeton University in 2007, supplemented by additional solicited essays. The studies contained therein tackle the themes in question across a diversity of sources—ancient Jewish and Christian, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Rabbinic, apocalyptic, Zoroastrian, and Islamic—extending from roughly the last centuries BCE to the beginning of the second millennium CE. (The volume’s title is thus a bit misleading on this point, to its detriment, since the collection is a fine example in the virtues of taking a look not at “late antiquity”—usually construed as third–seventh centuries CE—but, roughly, the entire first millennium CE.)¹ The roster of contributors strikes a healthy balance between established, senior voices and a veritable “who’s-who” of younger scholars who trained at (and, in several cases, now serve on the faculties of) elite North American universities.

The essays are arranged in loose chronological order, beginning with the Enochic literature and Graeco-Roman and Christian sources of the second–fourth centuries, before proceeding to Rabbinic, Zoroastrian, and Islamic materials. The editors, Philippa Townsend and Moulie Vidas, open the volume with a useful *status quaestionis* on prophecy and revelation in late ancient religion—an essay itself worthy of examination and reference, unlike many introductions to *Sammelbände*—before declaring the volume’s goal to be examination of “the contrast between revelation and human artifact and the connection between revelation and historiography.” (13)

Anne Yoshiko Reed examines how “models from biblical prophecy may have shaped the depiction of revelation” throughout the various works which comprise *1 Enoch*, as well as the reception of these works and the figure of Enoch more widely in late ancient Jewish and Christian literature (27). While “the image of Enoch as prophet seems to have taken shape particularly in

¹ See e.g. Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

the second to third centuries C.E.” amongst Christians, (38) it is an image which would enjoy “vibrant afterlives in Manichaeism and Islam,” but not late antique Judaism, which saw him “not as a prophet, but rather—yet again—as a scribe.” (40) Christine Trevett surveys early Christian evidence pertaining to the economics surrounding prophetic activity, particularly as regards the New Prophecy, which made provisions for its itinerant prophets as well as its settled leaders (63). In doing so, “the New Prophets were reviving and developing a practice with which some Christians of earlier generations would have been familiar.” (58) Pavlos Avlamis examines the sociohistorical and literary dynamics informing the epiphany of Isis in the *Life of Aesop*, where the goddess appears “as the exotic force of adventure-time” as a challenge to elite, Hellenic institutions represented in the novel by Apollo, opening “possibilities of a double vision for Greek eyes, and for a narrative that reflects upon the everyday and the ubiquitous through the fantasy of the outsider.” (93, 101)

Meanwhile, John D. Turner looks at the use of revelatory language to describe the achievement of a state of “learned ignorance” in the Platonizing Sethian apocalypse *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3). Turner believes this language to reflect not only literary artifice, but “a genuine description of a psychological experience” on the part of the text’s author (114). Gregory Shaw tackles the “dual reference” of divine and profane “realized through revelatory experience... described by Platonists of late antiquity,” particularly Iamblichus of Chalcis in his famous exposition of theurgy, *On the Mysteries* (118). Iamblichus, Shaw finds, is not simply concerned with abstruse metaphysics or ritual theory, but the mechanics and experience of revelation, which, encountered in the realms of embodiment, “must begin with our wounds” and traumas, as explicated in Orphic myth (129; also 121–22). Daniel L. Schwartz shows how fourth-century Christian liturgical discourse, despite great “emphasis on secrecy and the revelation of secrets” suggests “that the ideal of secrecy was not rigorously maintained.” (132; similarly, 141) “Precisely because the *disciplina arcani* was in many ways an open secret, the emphasis could not be on the conveyance of information,” but a sense of community (151). Eduard Iricinschi analyzes the anti-Manichaean writings of Augustine of Hippo, who “draws the picture of two conflicting book cultures, one Manichaean and the other one Christian, articulated by two different cosmologies, yet whose points of contentions revolve around ways of reading and interpreting the Bible.” (175)

Moving into a ‘late’ Late Antiquity, Azzan Yadin-Israel takes up the Rabbinic hero Rabbi Aqiva, addressing “the dramatic difference in the way Rabbi Aquiva’s midrash is represented in tannaitic versus post-tannaitic sources... The familiar

portrait of Rabbi Aqiva as a brilliant interpreter of Scripture is only attested in the latter. Tannaitic sources, in contrast, represent Rabbi Aqiva as...committed to the priority of extra-scriptural traditions.” (178; also 207) Ironically, Yadin-Israel suggests, it is “precisely Rabbi Aqiva’s loose allegiance to Scripture in the tannaitic sources that (at least in part) paves the way” for his later reputation as a master of Scripture (215). Martha Himmelfarb shows how the early Medieval apocalypses *Sefer Zerubbabel* and *Sefer Eliyyahu* “take a significantly different approach to the process of revelation and to the eschatological scenario revealed” than one finds in earlier apocalyptic literature (220), outlining new prospects for research on both texts (235–36). Examining the famous motif of four-world ages—with the fourth characterized by mixture and iron (e.g. Dan 2:43)—Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina demonstrates that “in the Pahlavi texts this literary-historical schema is mobilized in characteristically Zoroastrian ways which, while sharing certain striking similarities with Hesiod and Daniel, are...best understood by examining their use of apocalyptic rhetoric”—i.e., reading the Pahlavi texts on their own terms and with reference to the struggles and concerns of their authors and intended audience (238, 267–68).

The volume concludes with two particularly strong essays concerning the arrival in the Near East of the new revelation of Islam. Michael Pregill offers a “prolegomena” to a “comparative prophetology” across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in late antiquity (272, 313) by way of reviewing the exegeses of 1 Kings 22 concocted by Araham Ibn Ezra (d. 1164) and Bar Penkâyē (late 7th cent. CE). What he finds is that Islamic discourse about prophecy—and Jewish and Christian responses to it—have “authentically pre-Islamic roots,” and therefore “Jewish and Christian interest in prophecy” following the rise of Islam “should not be considered an exclusively post-Islamic phenomenon,” but a part of the expansion of Torah to “a widespread, almost ubiquitous, touchstone of religious identity and communal organization.” (298–99, 273) Patricia Crone[†] seeks “to identify what the so-called polytheists (*mushrikūn*) in the Qur’an took a messenger from God to be.” (316) By way of incisive exegesis with attention to Jewish and Christian biblical and parabiblical traditions, Crone demonstrates that the polytheists “were, or at least included followers of Moses” who believed (as did the author of the Moses Apocryphon [4Q377] and some Rabbinic writers) that God Himself had appeared to Moses and the Israelites at Sinai, and that revelatory knowledge was acquired via ascent, rather than transmitted downwards, despite Muhammad’s claim to the latter (327–28, 331–33). Rather than simply identifying the polytheists as “Jewish” or “Christian,” Crone closes the article (and volume) appropriately by calling for

historians to “map the theological landscape of the Near East at the time of the rise of Islam” with reference to more “diverse possibilities with reference to the pre-Qur’anic literature.” (336)

The essays are for the most part well-written and incisive; editorial quality is high, with typos mostly confined to two essays. The contributions’ overall strength and coherence as a group lend *Revelation, Literature, and Community* a value exceeding the sum of its parts, particularly for specialists in the religions of the late ancient/first-millennium Mediterranean. The present reviewer was especially struck by essays that successfully juggled Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources alike in mapping out trajectories of revelatory literature and claims (e.g. Reed, Pregill, Crone), and the continued relevance (despite criticisms and re-tooling) of Max Weber’s old model of charismatic and rationalized leadership in religious communities (highlighted by Trevett, 52). There is little to quibble with in terms of presentation, although it is worth noting that several of the essays will be nigh-impenetrable to non-specialists (e.g. Yadin-Israel); nonetheless, most take pains to achieve readability beyond the confines of their field (Shaw, Turner, and Vevaina, writing with relative distance from Biblical Studies, excel here).

Readers of *Correspondences* might ask if the papers are relevant to the study of esotericism. They are—although they do not engage with scholarship on ‘Western esotericism’—insofar as their explorations of revelation necessarily entail the study of secrecy and concealment (as recognized by Schwartz, 132). Therefore the volume (however inadvertently) may join other useful collections of studies of secrecy, revelation, and esotericism in the *History of Religions*.² The significance of this literature for students of esotericism is difficult to miss. Indeed, the very fact that a set of papers on revelation in the first millennium CE necessarily veers into the realms of apocalyptic, visionary, Gnostic, and Neoplatonic literature—*without at all having set out to look at ‘mysticism’ or ‘esotericism’*—should indicate the central importance that the dynamic of secrecy and revelation holds for any construal of ‘esotericism’

² E.g., Hans Kippenberg and Guy G. Stoumsa, eds., *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds., *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Syracuse: SUNY Press, 1997); Christian H. Bull, Liv Ingeborg Lied and John D. Turner, eds., *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices. Studies for Einar Thomassen at Sixty* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson, eds., *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions* (Durham/Bristol: Acumen, 2013); Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholz, eds., *Hidden Truths from Eden: Esoteric Readings of Genesis 1–3* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

as a second-order term. Conversely, the volume's wealth of meditation upon the interface of revelatory phenomena with the delineation of new religious communities should prove useful for those interested in the sorts of problems raised by claims made with reference to otherworldly authority. The greater confluence of revelatory claims and the various currents scholars have attempted to understand by recourse to the construct of 'esotericism' awaits thorough exploration, but the present volume offers many hints as to where such an investigation should begin. *Revelation, Literature, and Community in Late Antiquity* thus proves to be an excellent body of studies that will interest scholars of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam in the first millennium CE, and proves relevant and insightful reading for students of Gnosticism, mysticism, and esotericism, however these terms may be defined.

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Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, eds. *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013. xii + 494 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-23596-0. \$234

Within the history of Western esoteric currents and new religious movements (NRMs) in the nineteenth century and beyond, few organizations—whether in terms of historical impact, peak membership size, or subsequent discursive influence—tower as high as the Theosophical Society. As remarked by this present volume’s editors, “the formation of the Theosophical Society ... and the main events linked to the fate of this organization, its key figure Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), and her immediate successors belong to the short list of pivotal chapters of religious history in the West.”¹ At its absolute peak in 1928, the Theosophical Society was composed of 45098 due-paying members, spread throughout 1586 chartered lodges operating within the United States, India, England, and Australia.² From this membership, very respectable for an occultist group, emerged a vast corpus of literature which came to shape and define esoteric discourse throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not only does the Theosophical current “and its multiple offshoots [stand] as one of the world’s most important religious traditions” in and of itself,³ but it is hard to locate a Western esoteric current alive today whose discourses are *not* genealogical relatives of or descendants from those discourses which constitute the Theosophical current, with Blavatsky herself essentially functioning as a discursive nodal point, setting the stage for the ways in which modern esoteric currents approach the relationships between religious and scientific discourses.⁴

Given the importance of both the Theosophical Society and the Theosophical current to the history of NRMs and esoteric currents in the West, it comes off as a surprise that both remain “vastly understudied religious manifestations” within present-day academia.⁵ While there do exist documentary studies of the original Theosophical Society, as well as biographical accounts of its founders,

¹ Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, “Introduction,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 1.

² Gregory John Tillett, *Charles Webster Leadbeater, 1854–1934: A Biographical Study* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1986), 942–50.

³ Hammer and Rothstein, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴ Kocku von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2014), 98.

⁵ Hammer and Rothstein, “Introduction,” 2.

broad treatments of the Theosophical current itself and of the multitude of organizations birthed by the Theosophical Society are practically nonexistent. It is precisely this dearth in scholarship that Hammer and Rothstein seek to rectify with the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*—with their stated ambition being to produce a volume which covers “a reasonable range of topics concerning the history and impact of Theosophy,” without purporting to be “a complete survey of a field of vast dimensions.”⁶ Towards this end, Hammer and Rothstein’s volume collects twenty chapters from an interdisciplinary cross-section of senior and junior scholars—all of whose prior works have contributed to the body of scholarship on the Theosophical current, and many of whom are recognized as leading experts on the subject. There are some conspicuous absences within this group of authors—most notably James A. Santucci, Robert S. Ellwood, James R. Lewis, and Wouter J. Hanegraaff—who might be expected as contributors to a volume covering this territory. However, these absences do not detract from the overall quality of the book’s contents.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which is tightly focused on a specific aspect of scholarly inquiry. The first section, “Theosophical Societies,” is composed of four chapters that chronologically set out the history of the subject in terms of the first, second, and third generations of Theosophy. Throughout these seventy-four pages, authors Jocelyn Godwin, Catherine Wessinger, Tim Rudbøg, and W. Michael Ashcraft collectively present what is perhaps the most complete history of the successive incarnations of the Theosophical Society, from the foundation of the original society in 1875 by Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907); through the second generation of leadership in Adyar with Annie Besant (1847–1933), Charles W. Leadbeater (1854–1934), and Katherine Tingley (1847–1929); to the third generation, spanning the Theosophical Society (both Adyar and Pasadena branches) and the United Lodge of Theosophists (Los Angeles) in the twentieth century and beyond. Each author in this section expertly treats their respective historical period, the result of which is an all but unrivaled chronological history of the Theosophical societies, over a period spanning two hundred years.

The second section, “Religious Currents in the Wake of Theosophy,” collects eight chapters that variously treat distinct currents, movements, and organizations which emerged out of the core Theosophical current or the Theosophical Society. As with the preceding section, the topics are handled with very high degrees of scholarly care, attention to proper documentation and critical reasoning. The resulting picture, while not encyclopedic in nature, presents a very broad

⁶ Hammer and Rothstein, “Introduction,” 4, 11.

picture of post-Theosophical currents—some of which are likely to be familiar to students of Western esotericism, but others of which may not be. This reviewer was quite pleased to see treatments of currents more traditionally linked with Theosophy—such as Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer’s chapter on Rudolph Steiner’s Anthroposophy, Sean O’Callaghan’s chapter on Alice Bailey’s Theosophical Christology, or Hammer’s chapter, “Theosophical Elements in New Age Religion”—featured alongside those dealing with topics which have received much less scholarly attention—notably, Michael Abravanel’s work on the Summit Lighthouse group, Anita Stasulane’s chapter on Nicholas and Helena Roerich, and Mikael Rothstein’s “Mahatmas in Space: The Ufological Turn and Mythological Materiality of Post-World War II Theosophy.”

The third section, “Theosophy, Culture, and Society,” assembles eight chapters that deal with a broad variety of thematic topics, allowing in-depth discussions of key aspects of the Theosophical current. While less structured in terms of content than the preceding two sections, this collection of chapters coheres well in presenting a variety of topics that coalesce around the general subject of interactions between the Theosophical current and areas of Western culture and society outside of the current *sensu stricto*. The section begins with a chapter by the late Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, which masterfully situates the Theosophical current within the broader framework of the study of Western esotericism—charting the genealogy of the current as it relates to a wide variety of esoteric currents, such as 19th century Christian Theosophy, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, and Freemasonry. Subsequent chapters deal with topics ranging from social issues such as orientalism (Christopher Partridge’s “Lost Horizon: H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism”), race (Isaac Lubelsky’s “Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy”), and gender (Siv Ellen Kraft’s “Theosophy, Gender and the ‘New Woman’”); to more intellectual problems (Garry W. Trompf’s discussion of macrohistorical discourses within the Theosophical current and Egil Asprem’s astute analysis of “Theosophical Attitudes towards Science”); to a pair of thematically linked chapters assessing Theosophy’s impact on visual art (Tessel M. Bauduin’s “Abstract Art as ‘By-Product of Astral Manifestation’: The Influence of Theosophy on Modern Art in Europe”), and the impact of popular fiction on Theosophical discourse and vice versa (Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelson’s “Theosophy and Popular Fiction”). In each case, the chapters within this section make powerful contributions to the scholarly discussion of their respective topics as they relate to Theosophy.

As a whole, the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* is a remarkably cohesive volume. Edited collections containing articles aimed at specialist audiences are often plagued by a lack of cohesion, with it often being hard to imagine a single specialist reader capable of critically evaluating and finding utility in the volume as a whole. Quite the opposite is true of Hammer and Rothstein's book. The handbook is a rare instance of an edited collection where the intended group of specialists should find each and every individual chapter both intelligible and utile. The fact of the book's cohesion, compounded with the remarkably high quality of the component essays, makes the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* required reading for any scholar whose work touches at all on the Theosophical Society, its dominant current, or the myriad of related organizations and movements which emerged in its wake—in practical terms, this would include virtually all scholars dealing with Western esoteric currents and NRMs originating from the nineteenth century to the present. As is typical of books in the Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion series, the volume is handsomely produced, with high quality binding and paper, resulting in a book which should easily withstand either the rigors of library ownership, or the heavy reference use of an individual owner. Although the book's cost will likely preclude purchase by many individual readers, it is a volume which rightly belongs within any collection—institutional or personal—devoted in part to the Theosophical current.

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Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aa. Petersen. *The Invention of Satanism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 254 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-518110-4

Dyrendal, Lewis, and Petersen's book, *The Invention of Satanism*, focuses on modern religious Satanism by asking how Satanism was "invented as a declared or philosophical position, and how it serves as a personal and collective identity." (2) In order to answer this central query, the book approaches its topic as a *bricolage* (3)—presenting seemingly fragmented discourses on the satanic, showing how they inform the emergence of modern Satanism, which, in turn, reinterprets and reframes these discourses. The goal of the book is to present foundational historical knowledge that culminates with and expands on our understanding of modern religious Satanism. Each of the authors have published on this topic separately, and this present collaboration is an accessible and solid introductory text to the ever-growing scholarly discourse on religious Satanism.¹

The book begins by offering a brief survey of anthropological studies on lateral topics: witches, demons, and magic. The chapter correctly claims that ideas surrounding misfortune and malevolence reflect the personal and social concerns of any particular group. The authors track the concept of cosmic evil from ancient Zoroastrianism and its opposing dual forces, to Judaism's notions of an obstructor or accuser of Yahweh (in Job, this accuser is called a generic title: (Heb.) "*ha-satan*"), to a fully developed personification of evil within Christian theological discourse (where evil gets a proper name: Satan). This anthropomorphized framing of evil is discussed in terms of its socio-political development, as satanic rhetoric mirrors Christian tensions with external secular powers and internal heretical exegeses.

Tracing satanic rhetoric into the Enlightenment, the book discusses fictional portrayals of the devil in Romantic literature, where he came to represent ideals of liberty and intellectual pursuits. This depiction of Satan as a symbol of

¹ For other recent academic books on Satanism, see: Reuben van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer: the Origins of Modern Religious Satanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2014); Per Faxneld and Jesper Aa. Petersen, eds. *The Devil's Party: Satanism in Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

freedom, antinomianism, and individualism is then a springboard for various authors described in the chapter on “Satanic Precursors.” People such as Ben Kadosh, Stanislaw Przybyssewski, Maria de Naglowska, and Aleister Crowley use the image of Lucifer or Satan for “vitality, elitism, carnality, artistic and scientific creativity.” (36) The “European esoteric scene” and its confluence of occultism, theosophy, magic, and science produced the foundational ideas of modern Satanism (46).

The following chapters—four through nine—are the true meat of the book. Having outlined narratives that inform modern Satanism, the end chapters discuss how these narratives congeal in various religious and popular interpretations. These chapters outline Anton Szandor LaVey and his founding of the Church of Satan, its major schism, the Temple of Set founded by ex-Church of Satan Magister, Michael Aquino, and other persons and groups that identify as religiously satanic, such as the group garnering recent media attention with sensationalized promotional events, the Satanic Temple. Of note is the discussion on *The Satanic Bible* (arguably the primary text influencing Satanism today, published by LaVey in 1969) and LaVey’s strongly contested biographical details. The creation of the *The Satanic Bible* and its ostensible plagiarism, LaVey’s claims about magic as science, his lure and disdain for the occult milieu, his tension with detractors, friends, journalists and scholars alike, all frame LaVey as a provocative figure deliberately engaging with a “demonographical” charismatic authority (100). The line between fantasy and reality, within *The Satanic Bible* as well as in LaVey’s life story, are presented as a dual “mixture of the reactive, the esoteric, and the rationalist” (ibid). As the authors explain:

The carnivalesque attitude sometimes displayed in ritual and social settings probably did no harm in the countercultural environment. Add in inspiration from contemporary sociology and psychology in the use of popular occultism and the human potential movement, and LaVey had mixed his own cocktail of the ideas floating around in the occulture of his time. (65)

As Satanism expands beyond its controversial founder, it is enmeshed with notions of legitimacy and authority, and presents challenges to definitions of religion and magic. As other groups and individuals engage with LaVey and *The Satanic Bible*, continually modifying and reinterpreting Satanism, the “satanic milieu” (71) becomes constant in its consistent draw and fascination, but also transitory in terms of the high turnover of self-identifying Satanists, apart from select stable satanic organizations.

Also of note is the chapter on the Satanic Ritual Abuse scare of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a moral panic resulting in a modern-day witch-hunt, based on flimsy evidence, coaxed confessions, and the now debunked “repressed memory syndrome.” (125–29) This chapter, while not directly about active religious Satanists, is perhaps one of the strongest, as it demonstrates that Satanism, filtered through theological discourse and popular fears, allowed large segments of the population to project “folklore about Satan unto Satanism” and be convinced of a bizarre conspiracy theory about “a vast, underground network of evil satanic cults sacrificing and abusing children.” (103) If, in the Middle Ages, accusations of heretical “Satanism” reflected religio-political conflicts of the medieval church, so too did the modern-day so-called “Satanic Panic.” Despite having little to do with real religious Satanism, the popular obsession with all things “satanic” allowed people to imagine heinous fantasies, and inject their anxieties into the social problem *du jour*. Another distinctive aspect of this particular contribution to the field of Satanism studies are the chapters dealing with online surveys conducted by James R. Lewis. Though these sections are reworked material from previous article publications (not uncommon as an academic practice), they provide demographical statistics from a sociological perspective. Perhaps these chapters may read as somewhat dense to the novice reader unfamiliar with unpacking the charts, percentages, and survey questions that are integral to statistical analysis, but scholars will find use in the hard data, as such surveys are rare given the reclusive and secretive nature of most Satanists. These chapters provide a welcome glimpse into the satanic world, outside of canonical literature and official sources.

The Invention of Satanism provides a solid overview of the history of satanic discourse, theological framings, literary portrayals, conspiracy theories, as well as the continued obsession with Satanism in the popular mind, and the manner in which all these currents inform modern practicing religious Satanism as it continues to grow and shift. It contributes to the field as a respectable introductory academic text on religious Satanism, perhaps best suited for undergraduates or those unfamiliar with Satanism and scholarly approaches to it.

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