Wouter J. Hanegraaff[1]

Forbidden knowledge: anti-esoteric polemics and academic research[2]

> Discourse is a way of speaking about something which constructs what that something is.
> *Linda Williams*[3].

Having been involved over the last eight years in editing the two-volume *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, recently published by Brill[4], it was impossible for me not to be confronted almost daily with basic questions of definition and demarcation. What is it that justifies gathering such an enormous amount of often spectacularly different currents and personalities, from late antiquity to the present, under one and the same terminological rubric? The question has occupied me ever since I first began to be interested in the field[5], but by the time I had to write the Introduction to the Brill Dictionary, I was surprised at how easy I found it to answer. Having

[1] The text is published as submitted by the author.

[2] The first version of this paper was presented at the 19th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (I.A.H.R.), Tokyo, Japan, 24–30 March 2005. I am grateful to Antoine Faivre and Kocku von Stuckrad for their critical remarks on an earlier draft.

[3] Linda Williams, 'Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the «Frenzy of the Visible»'. London: Pandora, 1990. P. 276.

[4] *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* et al. Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism (DGWE). Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006.

[5] The development of my ideas in this regard can be traced through *Wouter J Hanegraaff*: 'A Dynamic Typological Approach to the Problem of «Post-Gnostic» Gnosticism', in: Aries. 1992 No. 16 P. 5–43; 'Emperical Method in the study of esotericism', in: Method & Theory in the Study of Religion. No. 7/2. 1995 P. 99–129; 'On the Construction of «Esoteric Traditions»', in: Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion / Ed. by A. Faivre, W.J. Hanegraaff. Leuven: Peeters, 1998 P. 11–61; 'The Study of Western Esotericism. New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture', in: New Approaches to the Study of Religion. Vol. I: Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches / Ed. by P. Antes, A.W. Geertz, R.R. Warne. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004 P. 489–519.

briefly discussed the most important terms and categories that have traditionally been used by scholars to speak about the field, I concluded that …seemingly innocuous terminological conventions are often the reflection of hidden or implicit ideological agendas. Perhaps no other domain in the study of religion has suffered from such biases as seriously as the one to which this Dictionary is devoted, for it covers more or less all currents and phenomena that have, at one time or another[1], come to be perceived as problematic (misguided, heretical, irrational, dangerous, evil, or simply ridiculous) from the per spectives of established religion, philosophy, science, and academic research[2].

This simple conclusion–reminiscent, in a way, of James Webb's concept of "rejected knowledge"[3]–provides the starting-point for the present article. In brief, I will argue that the field of study referred to as "Western esotericism" is the historical product of a polemical discourse, the dynamics of which can be traced all the way back to the beginnings of monotheism. Moreover, it is in the terms of this very same discourse that mainstream Western culture has been construing its own identity, up to the present day. This process of the construction of identity takes place by means of telling stories – to ourselves and to others – of who, what and how we want to be[4]. The challenge of the modern study of Western esotericism to academic research ultimately consists in the fact that it questions and undermines those stories, and forces us to see who, what and how we really *are*. Instinctive resistance against the breaking down of certainties implicit in such (self)knowledge is at the very root of traditional academic resistance against the study of Western esotericism.

1. Polemics and Procedures of Exclusion

Any polemical discourse, I suggest, is subject to a number of basic conditions:

1. It requires a sense of unrest or threat (in situations of total contentment and security–real or imaginary–there is no motivation for engaging in polemical discourse).

[1] Note the importance of this qualifier. It would be far from me to claim that all currents and phenomena that are nowadays gathered under the umbrella of "Western esotericism" were always perceived as problematic; in fact, the opposite is true, and an important task for the study of Western esotericism is to point out that many of its basic ideas and currents used to be part of normal acceptable discourse and of general Western culture, and came to be regarded as "other" only in later periods and as a result of specific historical developments (see e.g. the Enlightenment).

[2] *Wouter .J. Hanegraaff* 'Introduction' , in: Wouter .J. Hanegraaff . et al. Dictionary. Op. cit. XIII.

[3] *James Webb*, 'The Occult Undeground'. Ann Arbor: Open Court, 1974. P. 191. An important pioneer in the academic study of Western esotericism, Webb was also a child of his time, and his discussion of the occult as represent- ing "the flight from reason" (o.c., ch. 1) still strongly reflects the polemical discourse which I criticize in this paper.

[4] It is basic to my argument that the generic "we" includes ourselves as contemporary scholars of Western esotericism: assuming that it is only "them" who tell those stories means miss- ing the point altogether.

2. It requires that the source of threat be not entirely clear and readily accessible (if the enemy is standing on your doorstep threatening to kill you, you do not polemicize against him but seek to attack or defend yourself).

3. It requires a target (if,in contrast to the previous point, there is no enemy– real or imagined–that can be attacked, polemical discourse dies stillborn, from pure frustration).

4. It requires an audience (if nobody is interested in your polemics, the discourse never develops beyond the stage of mere monologue).

5. It requires simplicity, i.e. the discourse must be based on simple oppositions (complex arguments, with plenty of room for nuance and qualifications, are polemically ineffective).

Politicians know these things instinctively, and my points can easily be demonstrated at the example of the Bush administration's rhetoric about inter- national terrorism. The climate that made it possible was created by the acute sense of threat (1) caused by the 9–11 attack. Although the source of the threat was quickly identified as Al Qaida and Islamic terrorism generally, these faceless networks of groups and individuals were not readily available for retaliation (2). In order for a polemical discourse to develop against this background, an attackable target was needed (3): hence the political rhetoric came to focus first on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, then on Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Since the sense of threat was widely shared, the discourse found a receptive audience (4). And finally, its effectiveness relied on simple dualisms of unambiguous good versus unambiguous evil (5): "you are either with us or with the terrorists", the "axis of evil" stands against "the land of the free", the choice is between tyranny or democracy, and one may even have to choose between French fries or Freedom fries[1].

To prevent misunderstanding: the fact that any polemical discourse needs to "create" a target enemy does not, of course, imply that this enemy is wholly imaginary and constitutes no real threat. It does mean, however, that– whether there is a real enemy or not–a polemical discourse needs to make it look real *at least* in the imagination. And in order for this to happen, even the most concrete enemy needs to be simplified: the reified "other" in any polemical discourse is therefore always an artificial creature, juxtaposed against a no less artificial "self ". By simplifying the "other" as unambiguously bad, polemicists simultaneously create a simplified identity for them- selves as unambiguously good. In order for a polemical discourse

[1] For Bush's rhetoric, see the excellent (and very disturbing) article by Urban, 'Religion and Secrecy in the Bush Administration'; on page 6 Urban quotes a speech before the FBI on September25,2001:'I see things this way:The people who did this acton America…are evil people. They don't represent an ideology, they don't represent a legitimate political group of people. They're flat evil. That's all they can think about, is evil. And as a nation of good folks, we're going to hunt them down, and we're going to find them, and we will bring them to justice' (*Hugh Urban*, 'The Secrets of the Kingdom: Religion and Secrecy in the Bush Administration', in: Religious Studies Review 34(4). December, 2008 P. 6 Quoting from Bush G.W. 'We Will Prevail'. President George W. Bush on War, Terrorism and Freedom. New York: Continuum, 2003. P. 22).

to be effective, these two artificial entities and the clearcut opposition between them must take the place, on the screen of the human imagination, of the much more complex and messy realities "out there". The effectiveness of the discourse is proportional to the extent in which it succeeds in *confusing* its participants, so that they mistake the categories of their imagination for descriptions of reality[1].

Now, precisely such a reification of imaginary constructs by means of polemical discourse over many centuries, or so I will argue, is at the bottom of the modern and contemporary perception of "Western esotericism" as a separate tradition or field of research rather than as merely a dimension of Western culture generally. This is not an argument for discarding any such concepts; but it is an argument for not confusing our constructs with historical reality[2].

To understand the emergence of "Western esotericism" as a field of research, we need to look not only at the dynamics of polemical discourse, but also at the various procedures of exclusion that function within such a discourse. Michel Foucault has famously distinguished between three such procedures: prohibitions, the opposition of reason against madness, and the opposition of true against false[3]. I intend to slightly complicate this list by distinguishing between *two* kinds of prohibition; and it seems to me that Foucault ignored the difference between *reasons for* exclusion and *strategies of* exclusion. Thus I end up with four kinds of objection against the "others" in polemical discourses, and two kinds of strategy:

[1] I realize that the implications are far reaching. If I claim that polemical discourse creates confusion between imagination and reality, and argue (as I will do in the rest of the article) that it is the task of scholarship to criticize such confusion and call attention to the complexity of historical reality, some critics will object that this may be academically correct but politically naive and even dangerous, because it blurs the distinction between good and evil and ends up defending moral relativism. I maintain that the commitment of academic scholarship in the Enlightenment tradition is to the truth, by means of critical research and reflection (even though any such "truth" is always limited, conditional and provisory); obscuring the truth in the interest of "morality" is far more immoral than facing up to the fact that any moral commitment is indeed a commitment, not a logical inference from unquestionable metaphysical truths (cf. on this point my discussion of relativism in: *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* 'Prospects for the Globalization of New Age: spiritual imperialism versus cultural diversity', in: Religion and globalization: critical concepts in social studies. Vol. 2 Amsterdam Institute for Humanities Research (AIHR): Routledge, 2011 P. 43–56). 'Prospects for the Globalization').

[2] As argued at length in my 'On the Construction' (*Wouter J. Hanegraaff,* op. cit.). Confusion of this kind is demonstrated particularly clearly by the multiple cases of authors who have used Antoine Faivre's famous definition of Western esotericism (in terms of four intrinsic and two non-intrinsic variables) as a lithmus test for deciding whether person x or movement y "is" esoteric or not. See my discussion of this problem in: *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* 'The Study of Western Esotericism'. Op. cit. P. 508.

[3] *Michel Foucault*, 'L'ordre du discours'. Paris: Gallimard, 1971 P. 11-23 ('L'interdit', 'l'opposition raison et folie', 'l'opposition du vrai et du faux' [i.e. 'la volonté de vérité']).

reason for exclusion	positive alternative	preferred strategy
danger	– safety	prohibition
immorality	– morality	prohibition
irrationality	– reason	ridicule
error	– truth	ridicule

Let me take some examples. Harddrugs are prohibited because they are considered dangerous, but not because they induce immoral behaviour; and polemical discourse concerned with "the war on drugs" addresses a sense of threat to public safety by reducing a complex compound with fuzzy boundaries to a simple generic concept[1]. Attempts to restrict or prohibit pornography, in contrast, are typically defended with moral arguments (its "dangers" being presented as dangers to morality); and here, again, the category is highly artificial[2]. Such attempts at prohibition make no reference to reason

[1] "Drugs" is a nice example of an "artificial enemy" created in the collective imagination by means of simplification. For example, in the Netherlands the "party drug" XTC is considered an illegal hard drug, wereas alcohol use is accepted. The facts are that alcohol is physically addictive and its misuse frequently causes serious violent behaviour, whereas XTC is not physically addictive and makes its users feel soft and loving instead of aggressive. While too much XTC can be dangerous to one's health, the same goes for too much alcohol. Including under illegal "hard drugs" a substance like XTC but not alcohol is therefore highly artificial, and difficult to defend rationally. The simplified entity "drugs" as it functions in popular dis- course in fact refers to a multifarious collection of psychoactive substances that differ greatly in their effects, their health hazards, and in being addictive or not; as a result, addictive and dangerous substances such as e.g. heroin are incorrectly lumped together with e.g. various non- addictive herbal brews containing dimethyltryptamine (Ayahuasca, Jurema etc.), which present no danger to health and whose psychoactive properties can even have demonstrable healing effects.

[2] This is demonstrated with particular clarity in the classic study of pornography by *Walter Kendrick*, 'The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture'. Oakland: University of California Press, 1996. Likewise. Bette Talvacchia in her splendid study of Renaissance eroticism formulates very precisely how and why pornography is an artificial polemical con- struct:'the creation of pornography… comes from targeting particular objects,images,and texts as offensive to morality and therefore unacceptable, so that a pornographic object cannot exist without the discourse that identifies it. In this view, there is never any inherently porno- graphic nature in any cultural production; rather, certain kinds of sexual representations are singled out and argued to be pornographic' (*Bette Talvacchia*, 'Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture'. Princeton: University Press; 1st edition, 1999; mutatis mutandis – i.e. by replacing the term "pornography/pornographic" by "esotericism/esoteric" and "sexual" by "religious"–exactly the same argumentation can easily be applied to the category of Western esotericism). As is well-known, pornography was singled out as a target of polemics by feminist activists, with Andrea Dworkin as perhaps the most notorious example; their militant pro- censorship arguments have been countered by anti-censorship feminists such as notably Linda Williams (for this distinction, see *Linda Williams*, 'Hard Core'. Op. cit. P. 16–30).

or truth. Western esotericism or its associated components (e.g. "magic", "astrology", "the occult", etcetera), in contrast, tend to be a frequent focus of mild ridicule by contemporary academics; they are not considered immoral or dangerous to society, but are simply dismissed as irrational and false. One does not take such things seriously; for if one does, one risks finding one- self excluded from acceptable discourse[1]. At first sight an attitude of ridicule may hardly seem to qualify as a "polemical" strategy, but I will argue that, on the contrary, its historical roots as far as Western esotericism is concerned are polemical in the extreme. It is only because the "other" in question is no longer believed to pose a serious threat today, that prohibition and persecution have been replaced by the milder–but not necessarily less effective– strategy of ridicule.

2. The Grand Polemical Narrative

I hardly need to emphasize that an analysis within the space of a few pages of a polemical discourse that (as I announced above) 'can be traced all the way back to the beginnings of monotheism' can only be sketchy in the extreme. Therefore the following overview is in no way intended as an empirically adequate description of historical reality, but merely intends to sketch the outlines of a possible heuristic approach to it, in view of specific questions that the study of Western esotericism cannot afford to ignore.

3. The Construction of Paganism: Monotheism versus Idolatry

It is natural to assume that the polemical target of monotheistic discourse consists in "polytheism", but in fact that opposition is a relatively recent phenomenon. The term "polytheism" was introduced by Philo of Alexandria[2], but came to be used by other authors only since Jean Bodin in 1580[3], and the term "monotheism" was coined by Henry More in 1660 as a counterterm against polytheism. After Philo and up to the end of the 16th century, the basic opposition was another one: that of worship of the one true God versus idolatry. The discourse that pits "monotheism" against "idolatry" goes back, of course, to the Hebrew Bible, which codifies it in the Second

[1] A perfect example at which one can study this dynamics is Immanuel Kant's polemics against Emanuel Swedenborg, in his Träume eines Geistersehers of 1766 For an analysis, see the section on Kant in: *Wouter .J. Hanegraaff,* 'Swedenborg's Magnum Opus' (forthcoming).

[2] *Francis Schmidt*, 'Polytheisms: Degeneration or progress?', in: History and Anthropology Vol. 3, 1987 P. 9–60. 10 and 52 nt 1 (with reference to Philo of Alexandria: 'De mutatione nominum', 205; 'De opificio mundi', 171; 'De ebrietate', 110; 'De confusione longuarum', 42; 144; 'De migratione Abrahami', 69 khazarzar.skeptik.net/books/philo/metonomg.htm).

[3] *Francis Schmidt*, 'Polytheisms: Degeneration or progress?', Op. cit. 10 and 52 nt 2 (*Jean Bodin*, La démonomanie des sorciers. Paris: Jacques du Puys,1580.Bk I, ch V).

Commandment, and is of absolutely basic importance to how Jews, Christians and Muslims have construed their identities. As formulated by Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, 'The prohibition against idolatry is the thick wall that separates the non-pagans from pagans'[1].

As brilliantly argued by Jan Assmann, underneath this distinction is an even more basic one. Western monotheism he describes as the space severed or cloven by the distinction between true and false in religion[2]. This dis- tinction, although first drawn by Akhenaten in the 14th century B.C., he refers to as the "Mosaic Distinction" because it has come to be linked to the name of Moses in the actual mnemohistory of Western civilization. It created the new phenomenon of what Assmann refers to as "counter-religion": a type of religion that does not function as a means of intercultural translation (the gods of one pantheon being considered translatable into those of another) but as a means of intercultural estrangement, and which defines itself by rejecting and repudiating the gods of other and earlier peoples–in other words, by a polemical discourse:

Narratively, the distinction is represented by the story of Israel's Exodus out of Egypt. Egypt thereby came to symbolize the rejected, the religiously wrong, the "pagan". As a consequence, Egypt's most conspicuous practice, the worship of images, came to be regarded as the greatest sin. Normatively, the distinction is expressed in a law code which conforms with the narrative in giving the prohibition of "idolatry" first priority. In the space that is constructed by the Mosaic distinction, the worship of images came to be regarded as the absolute horror, falsehood, and apostasy. Polytheism and idolatry were seen as the same form of religious error. The second commandment is a commentary on the first… Images are automatically "other gods", because the true god is invisible and cannot be iconically represented[3].

The mosaic distinction, then, takes concrete shape in the form of the *true* religion of the one invisible God, defined by its rejection of the *false* religion of idols.

Idolatry as the rhetorical "other" of monotheism often came to be associated with danger and immorality, but clearly the more basic procedure of exclusion relied on the opposition between truth and error. There is no obvious danger in worshiping idols–quite the contrary, pagans would consider it dangerous to neglect such worship–, and it must have been very puzzling to pagans that Jews and Christians often described it in moral terms as "whoredom"[4]; such associations naturally followed, however, in the wake

[1] *Moshe Halbertal & Avishai Margalit,* 'Idolatry'. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994 P. 236

[2] *Jan Assmann* 'Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism' .Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997 P. 1–2. Cf: *Jan Assmann*, 'Die Mosaische Unterscheidung: oder der Preis des Monotheismus'. München: Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co. KG, 2003.

[3] *Jan Assmann* 'Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism'. Op. cit.

[4] The connotations of idolatry with sexual transgression and immorality (e.g. infidelity, prostitution, nymphomania) are pervasive in the Hebrew Bible, and are discussed in detail in the first chapter ("Idolatry and Betrayal") of *Moshe Halbertal & Avishai Margalit*, 'Idolatry'. Op. cit.

of the prior perception, basic to monotheism, of pagan idolatry as false belief[1]. And this category of error, which in contemporary Western society is sanctioned by no more than ridicule, became the object of grave prohibitions in the original Jewish context and later throughout the history of Christianity. Simply to be wrong constituted a capital offense[2].

The construction of a "pagan other" is the first crucial move in the Grand Polemical Narrative by which mainstream Western culture has been construing its own identity. It is easy to demonstrate that, as a matter of historical fact, ideas and traditions integral to paganism have nevertheless been essential components of Christianity from very early on[3], and have continued to exert an enormous influence throughout the history of Western culture: obvious examples are Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, but also Hermetism and even Zoroastrianism in elite culture, or the enormous variety of pagan practices that have always continued to thrive in popular culture[4]. But in the

[1] Which became considerably worse if it happened not out of ignorance, but was seen as a conscious choice and commitment; hence the strong association in the Hebrew Bible of idolatry with sexual infidelity. As explained by Halbertal and Margalit, '[t]hrough the root metaphor of marriage, God's relationship to Israel is construed by the prophets as exclusive. Within the marriage metaphor God is the jealous and betrayed husband, Israel is the unfaithful wife, and the third parties in the triangle–the lovers–are the other gods. Idolatry, then, is the wife's betrayal of the husband with strangers, with lovers who had no shared biography with Israel, the other gods whom Israel never knew' (*Moshe Halbertal & Avishai Margalit*, 'Idolatry'. Op. cit, 237; cf. detailed discussion on 9–36).

[2] I cannot here go into the juridical aspects of this development. For an excellent discussion focused on the case of astrology, see *Kocku von Stuckrad,* 'Das Ringen um die Astrologie'. Berlin: Walter ве Gruyter, 2011 P. 782–797. What was perceived as the irrationality or insanity of heretical and "pagan" belief (see e.g. the Edict of Emperor Theodosius, quoted in *Kocku von Stuckrad*, 'Das Ringen um die Astrologie', Op. cit. P. 797: 'Dementes vesanosque… haeretici dogmatis') could be sanctioned by prohibition and persecution.

[3] The only way in which anyone can possibly deny this, is by reverting to the concept that "Christianity"consists only of "true Christianity". Such an approach is obviously unacceptable from any historical and academic perspective; nevertheless it has been basic to traditional Church history, and occasionally this is even openly admitted by Church historians themselves (see the representative case of Bakhuizen van den Brink discussed in my 'The Dreams of Theology': *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*, 'The dreams of theology and the realities of Christianity', in: Theology andConversation: Towards a Relational Theology. Eds. Haers. J. & de. Mey. P. Leuven; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2003).

[4] The cases of Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism are too well known to require biblio- graphical support. As for Hermetism, see e.g. *Claudio Moreschini*, 'Storia dell'ermetismo cristiano'.Brescia: Morcelliana, 2000; *Roelof van den Broek, Paolo Lucentini, Vittoria Perrone Compagni, and Antoine Faivre,* 'Hermetic Literature I, II, IV', in: *Wouter .J. Hanegraaff* et al. Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism (DGWE). Op. cit. P. 487–499. For Zoroastrianism the standard reference is *Michael Stausberg,* 'Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit'. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998. For popular culture, among a flood of studies see e.g. *Dieter Harmening*, 'Superstitio'. München: Erich Schmidt Verlag GmbH & Co KG, 1979; *Valerie Irene Jane Flint*, 'The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe'. Princeton University Press,

imagination of Christians this factual omnipresence of paganism in Christianity has been obscured with remarkable success by the power of polemical discourse[1]. This discourse rested upon an imaginal con- struct: the ideal concept of the Church as the "pure", "uncontaminated", "healthy" body of Christ which continuously needs to be defended against the danger of "attack", "contamination", "infection" and so on, by its enemies. Few Christians would deny that such contamination often did take place–after all, any claim that the historical (rather than the ideal) Church was entirely pure and healthy would amount to denying the presence of sin and the need for redemption. But the ambiguities, complexities and general messiness of historical reality made it all the more necessary to uphold the clarity of the ideal.

Accordingly, our concern here is not with the unavoidable gap between spiritual ideal and earthly realities, but with the common confusion between those two in the practice of *historiography*, which has consistently sought to exorcize the paganism integral to historical Christianity by presenting it as "other". Theologically such a rhetorical procedure was not only understandable but necessary: as a "counter-religion" born from the monotheistic rejection of idolatry, Christianity would not have been able to define its own identity otherwise. Nevertheless, from a consistent historical perspective – which defines its very identity (!) by opposing demonstrable facts against pious rhetoric, contingency against providence, diversity against unicity, complexity against simplicity, and indeed relativity against dogmatic truth- claims[2] – such procedures do confuse myth with reality, and are simply incorrect.

In sum: I suggest that the construction of a "pagan other" has been the first step–and arguably the most crucial one–in the development of a "grand narrative" of Western religion, culture and civilization. This narrative of "who,

1991, or *Keith Thomas* Religion and the Decline of Magic. Oxford University Press, 1971. With the possible exception of Aristotelianism, the "idolatrous" dimension of the traditions was quite obvious: one thinks of the practice of telestikè (animation of statues) in Neoplatonic theurgy, the criticism (since Augustine, and greatly emphasized by William of Auvergne) of Hermetic idolatry as evident from Asclepius 23-24/37-38, the traditional status of Zoroaster as the inventor of magic (inseparable, as will be seen, from idolatry), and the generally "idolatrous" nature or implications of many "folklore" traditions in Christianity (e.g. use of talismans, veneration of statues of saints).

[1] For a longer development of this point, see: *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*, 'The dreams of theology and the realities of Christianity'. Op. cit.

[2] Hence historians should beware of creating their own polemical simplifications. One could argue that the present paper, and my 'Dreams of Theology' article (op. cit), are themselves examples of a polemical discourse. Although I do not wish to construe "theologians" as an artificial enemy, it is true that they are indeed a target in sofar as they confuse myth and reality; and although the simplification necessary in any polemical discourse is explicitly incompatible with the very position I am defending, I cannot avoid it altogether if I want to make myself understood. If this proves anything, it is that me and my opponents find ourselves in the same predicament, insofar as none of us can claim the virtue of an "uncontaminated purity" as opposed to the "error" of our opponents. Which is, in fact, exactly my point.

what and how we want to be" relies upon a concept of who, what and how we do *not* want to be: pagan, or associated with anything pagan. But regardless of such wishes, as a matter of historical fact paganism is and always has been part of what we *are*: it is an integral part of Western religion, culture and civilization, and cannot be separated from what lived Christianity has been from the very beginning. This fact, however, could not be openly acknowledged, or even be allowed to surface into conscious awareness; and as a result, a "space" was created in the collective imagination that was occupied by the pagan "other". In the course of a long development, this space eventually developed into what we now refer to as Western esotericism.

4. The Construction of Heresy: Christianity versus Gnosticism

All the later stages in the development of the Grand Polemical Narrative are to some extent variations on the basic opposition of pagan versus nonpagan, which is in its bare essence an opposition of error versus truth. But they added new rhetorical twists to it, which variously emphasized the variants of "danger", "immorality" and "irrationality" (or "madness"); and they added a wealth of new contents, in the form of various ideas and beliefs that had not been present in the original imaginary of "paganism" or had remained implicit rather than overt.

"Gnosticism" is a particularly clear example of an artificial construct that came to be reified by means of polemical discourse–so successfully, in fact, that almost all academic specialists throughout the 19th and 20th centuries have assumed that it referred to a historically identifiable current or movement. It is sobering to realize that the very term "gnosticism" was invented as late as 1669 by (again) Henry More, as a pejorative umbrella concept for what polemicists like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome and Ipiphanius of Salamis had rejected as heresy in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Significantly, in view of the previous section, More's primary focus of attack was Catholicism, described as 'a spice of the old abhorred Gnosticism' and a false prophecy that seduces true Christians into (guess what …) idolatry![1]

In one of the most important recent studies in the field, Michael Allen Williams has explained in detail why "gnosticism" is in fact a 'dubious

[1] See *Henry More,* 'An exposition of the seven epistles to the seven churches together with a brief discourse of idolatry, with application to the Church of Rome' (1669). Ann Arbor: EEBO Editions, ProQuest, 2011 P.99 ('…to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to Idols, which is a chief point of that which was called Gnosticisme'), and for the formulation quoted in the text, see *idem*, 'Antidote against Idolatry [unpaginated]', included as an appendix to the Exposition. For the complete original quotations, see *Bentley Layton*, 'Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism', in: The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks, ed. L. Michael White and O.L. Yarbrough. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1995. P. 348–349 (=Appendix: Henry More's Coinage of the Word Gnosticism).

category' that creates a distorted picture of historical reality and therefore should be 'dismantled' as soon as possible[1]. And Karen L. King has provided useful discussions not only of how "gnosticism" was construed as the fundamental heresy, but also of how the heresiological polemics of the 2nd and 3rd centuries have provided modern scholarship with its basic terminological conventions and theoretical assumptions[2]. Her discussion provides detailed confirmation of my basic point that "gnosticism" is an artificial polemical construct that has always consisted in the imagination rather than in historical reality, and could be created and kept alive only by means of simplification. King's conclusion says it all: …the polemicists have reigned supreme for most of the twentieth century; scholars have tended to evaluate Gnosticism negatively, and on nearly the same grounds as the polemicists did heresy. Gnosticism has been described as theologically inferior and ethically flawed; as an artificial and syncretic parasite; as an individualistic, nihilistic, and escapist religion incapable of forming any kind of true moral community. Scholars have included an increasingly wide range of diverse materials under the category of Gnosticism, and yet they have chafed at the problem of defining its essential characteristics. But above all, we have been mistakenly preoccupied with determining its origin and tracing its genealogical relation to orthodox Christianity because we have unwittingly reified a rhetorical category into a historical entity[3].

As in the case of paganism, "gnosticism" was rhetorically excluded primarily as being based upon theological "error"; hence its usefulness for defining the polemicists' identity as representatives of "orthodoxy" – upholders of the right doctrine. Other negative features followed as a matter of course: "gnosticism" is "dangerous" because it stimulates individualism and hence division, that is to say, it undermines legitimate authority; those who lack a solid grounding in the truth are bound to lapse into "immoral" behaviour, and of course examples (such as the well-known accusations of sexual libertinism) are readily found; and their rejection of philosophy as a sufficient way towards divine knowledge could be used to present the gnostic emphasis on "gnosis" as demonstrating their lack of rationality. Furthermore, as with "paganism", it is striking how frequently one encounters the language of purity and contamination.

As I emphasized earlier, the imaginary nature of "gnosticism" does not mean that it did not correspond with anything real. But instead of any

[1] *Michael Allen William*, 'Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category'. Princeton University Press, 1999; and see discussion in: *Roelof van den Broek*, 'Coptic Gnostic and Manichaean Literature 1996–2000', in: Mat Immerzeel M, Vliet J. (eds.) Coptic Studies on the Threshold of a New Millennium I: Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Coptic Studies, Leiden, 27 August-2 September 2000 Leuven, Paris, Dudley, MA: Peeters & Departement Oosterse Studies, 2004. P. 673–676.

[2] *Karen L King*, 'What is Gnosticism?' Kambridge: Belknap Press; Revised ed. edition, 2005.

[3] *Karen L King,* 'What is Gnosticism?' Op. cit. P. 52.

well- defined "current", "movement", or even "religion" of gnosticism[1], what we do find in the Roman empire during the later hellenistic period is a diffuse and complex type of religiosity, based upon the pursuit of gnosis or salvific esoteric knowledge[2]. It included not only what Williams would like us to call "biblical demiurgical" traditions, but also Christians such as Clement of Alexandria and the currents that inspired the hermetic literature; and as those examples readily demonstrate, it ignored religious boundaries and could manifest itself in pagan and Christian, as well as in Jewish contexts. This fluidity and flexibility may have been one reason why the polemicists felt threatened by it. The construction of heresy, as explained by King, 'was only one part of the larger rhetorical enterprise of establishing the boundaries of normative Christianity, which also had to distinguish itself from other forms of belief and practice, notably Judaism and paganism'[3]. The basic polemical strategies were similar in all these cases, but the targets were recognizably different. Hence it made sense for polemicists to reduce the problem of gnosis to its manifestations that called themselves Christian. By and large, this is what became the heresy later called "gnosticism". Other manifestations of gnosis could be subsumed under the umbrellas of Judaism and Paganism, and refuted as part of relatively separate polemics.

5. The Construction of Magic: Christianity versus Demon-Worship

The term *magiké* (the art of the *mágoi*, or Persian priests) originated with the Greeks, who used it to indicate 'a ritual practitioner occupied with private rites whose legitimacy was contested and often, at least in later times, marginalised and forbidden'[4]. From the beginning, *mageia* was an imprecise but generally negative term, referring to what was seen as the opposite of legitimate and overt religious practice[5]. There were many equivalents to *magiké* or aspects of it, such as the Greek *góes* (someone who communicates with the dead, hence *goeteía*), *pharmakeútria* (a woman using herbs and drugs) or *analutés* (a specialist in undoing binding-spells), and the Latin *saga* (witch), *veneficus* (poisener) or *maleficus* (evildoer)[6]. Early Christian authors in the Roman empire inherited the concept of *magia* and its

[1] Cf. the famous title by *Hans Jonas*, 'The Gnostic Religion. Boston: Beacon Press'; 3rd edition, 2001.

[2] *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*, 'Introduction', VII-VIII (with reference to *Roelof van den Broek*. 'Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion' in: *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* et al. Dictionary. Op. cit. P. 404–416).

[3] *Karen L King*, 'What is Gnosticism?' Op. cit. P. 21.

[4] As formulated by *Fritz Graf*, 'Magic in the Ancient World': Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997 P. 719.

[5] For Greek and Latin understandings of the term "magic" and its cognates, see also *Albert De Jong*, 'Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek And Latin Literature'. Leuden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997 P. 387ff.

[6] *Fritz Graf*, 'Magic in the Ancient World'. Op. cit. P. 719

equivalents as a category of exclusion, but naturally understood it within their own framework of true versus false religion, that is to say, the opposition of Christian belief against pagan idolatry. Up through the 12th century, which saw the emergence of new concepts of *magia naturalis*, magic in Christian discourse became therefore equivalent to trafficing with demons[1], who, as was well understood, were the very same entities that had manifested them- selves as "gods" to the pagans.

Hence it is quite clear that the Christian discourse of magic came to occupy a major part of the "space" in the collective imagination that had been created by the original monotheism-paganism distinction. In that process, how- ever, the imaginary "other" acquired a new aura. From the perspective of anti-pagan counter-religion, the Greek and Roman concept of magic as illegitimate or forbidden practice became something much more dramatic, by being "demonized" as the domain of the Enemy of Mankind. As explained by Valerie Flint.

The characterization of "magic" as the work solely of wicked demons, and of "sorcerers" and "magicians" as their servants, stemmed from two convergent developments. In the first place, the concept of the"daimon"changed… In the second, "magia", or "magic", became the *chief* term whereby the most powerful of the emerging religious systems described, and condemned, the super- natural exercises of their enemies. In brief, as organized and institutionalized religious practice was asked to play an ever more prominent place in the daily life of humans, as an exclusive form of monotheism commanded much of this practice, and as Christianity, in particular, assumed . . . a quasi-imperial role, the older, looser, views of the dealings of human beings with the "daimones" could no longer be tolerated. The "daimon" was translated, then, into the evil demon of Judaic and Christian literature…Thus,-those humans who looked to obtain supernatural help in the older ways and through an older or different "daimon", came to be viewed by many as terminally deluded, and their exercises seen as magic as its worst. Sorcerers and magicians were then "demonized" by being declared subject only to the demonic forces of evil, and were described as offer- ing reinforcement to the most wicked of these forces' designs. The process of demonisation was greatly assisted by the extraordinary range of activities which had meanwhile been captured under the name of magic[2].

In the course of such redefinitions of pagan religion as (demonic) magic, the original emphasis on religious error clearly shifted towards an emphasis on *danger*. While one may seek to refute the errors of pagans, gnostics, or heretics generally, in an effort to win them over to the truth, such an approach is useless in the case of demons: the important thing is, rather, to protect individuals and society against the enemy. And because–as rightly

[1] *Richard Kieckhefer*, 'Magic in the Middle Ages'. Cambridge University Press, 2000 P. 10–11.

[2] *Valerie Flint* 'The Demonisation of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity: Christian Redefinitions of Pagan Religions', in: Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Vol. 2 Ancient Greece and Rome Edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999 P. 279.

pointed out by Flint–an enormous variety of activities had now come to be covered by the same term "magic", they could all be perceived as manifestations of one and the same threat. Again, we see how simplification is essential to a polemical agenda. The assumption of demonic agency became in fact the only universally agreed-upon characteristic of "magic", which now functioned as a polemical waste-basket category lumping together such widely different things as divination (itself a category including various techniques, e.g. geomancy, hydromancy, aeromancy, pyromancy, astrology, observation of flight and sounds of birds, or of the entrails of animals, and so on)[1], evocation of angels, demons or the dead, curse tablets and image magic, amulets and talismans, the activities of witches, enchantment by magical use of words, ligatures, and so on.

Nowadays, all these "exceptive arts" or varieties of "superstition"[2] are routinely associated – by specialized academics no less than by the general audience–with "magic" (or with the more recent term "the occult"); and throughout the history of Christianity, theologians have sought to convince their fellow Christians that these activities were unlawful, dangerous, immoral, deluded, and wrong. of course, the mere fact that they needed to do so proves that many Christians *did* practice them. There is no particular reason to assume that, in doing so, they intended to choose the devil's part; more likely they simply expected to gain something useful from these arts and techniques, and did not see why they should be so incompatible with Christian faith. Again, I would emphasize that from a historical point of view, all such practices, no matter how far removed they may be from standard concepts of normative Christianity, must be recognized as integral parts of the tapestry of Christianity as a living culture[3]. Within that culture, "magic" has always been a hotly contested space, but the efforts of leading theologians and church leaders to exclude it as the "other" of Christianity should be seen as part of a polemical discourse internal to Christianity itself, rather than being taken at face value as though they were a historically reliable description of factual realities. In the practice of church history and largely of history in general, however, the standard phenomenon of a confusion between polemical concepts and historical realities has reigned supreme. Just as in the case of "gnosticism", the terms and categories of the polemicists have (consciously or unconsciously) been taken over by academics and have been allowed to strongly influence the way we have perceived and construed the history of Christianity and of Western culture as a whole.

[1] See *Thérèse Charmasson*, 'Divinatory Arts' in: *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*. et al. Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism. Op. cit.

[2] See the catalogues of practices associated with this term in *Dieter Harmening*, 'Superstitio'. Op. cit.

[3] The only alternative is the arrogant position, implicit in traditional approaches, according to which only an elite of professional theologians ever really understood what Christianity meant: a position that (arrogance apart) can logically be maintained only if one holds to an essentialist instead of historical understanding of Christianity. See again my 'Dreams of Theology' (op. cit).

6. The Re-Construction of Paganism: Protestantism versus Roman Catholicism

That "paganism" and "magic" had actually become integral parts of Christianity was keenly perceived by the leaders of the Reformation, who accordingly sought to exclude Roman Catholicism from the domain of legitimate religion. Hence history repeated itself in the 16th century: the Reformation–and Calvinism most in particular–defined its very identity by polemically excluding Roman Catholicism as the "other" of true Christianity, in a way that is structurally similar to the cases we have just explored. In this process, the emphasis shifts back again from "danger" towards "error"[1].

The relation between "paganism" and "magic" in this Protestant discourse is extremely complex, with the concept of "idolatry" as arguably a major point of connection; but this is hardly the place to go into that problematics in any detail. Suffice it to say that the truth-error distinction basic to traditional anti-pagan polemics is given a vehement new sting in the new Protestant variety, by means of being framed in terms of a distinction between *belief and practice*. This was something new. In a Roman Catholic context the true doctrine was not only embodied in the Church, but also ritually enacted in its central ceremonies; therefore by religious practice, the faithful participated in the truth. Not so from a Protestant perspective. Salvation comes from faith alone, that is to say, not from ritual participation, good works, or any other kind of practice. Together with Roman Catholicism, this principle has the effect of very cleanly and effectively excluding both "paganism" and "magic" from the domain of legitimate Christianity.

The same simple Protestant principle has exerted an enormous influence over how the nature of "religion" has come to be perceived since the 16th century, in academic contexts and generally–with far-reaching but usually overlooked implications for the study of Western esotericism. The modern study of religion has only slowly managed to break free from the crypto-Protestant idea that religion is based upon–and hence defined by–"belief " (i.e. upon the adherence to certain propositions held to be true), and many scholars continue to think in these terms even today. Applied to the history of Christianity, this has the effect of calling attention away from its symbolic, mythical and ritual aspects[2], in favour of an artificial concentration on Christian doctrine as supposedly representing the core of what Christianity

[1] And note that the strategy of ridicule was a major one already in this context. One good example of this is the Calvinist polemicist Philips van Marnix, Lord of St. Aldegonde (1540– 1598), whose biting satire De Biëncorf der H. Roomsche Kercke (The Beehive of the Roman Catholic Church; 1569) went through many editions. See also the "invectives" discussed in *Claude Postel*, 'Traité des invectives au temps de la Réforme'. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2004.

[2] While highlighting the triad "symbol, myth and ritual" in what follows, I will assume that they include the role of the visual as such. The religious use of images may be included under ritual practice, regardless of whether images are seen as mere "symbols" or, more concretely, as direct representations or embodiments of what they represent.

is all about for the believer. In terms of the Grand Polemical Narrative such a reduction makes perfect sense, but historically it is extremely misleading, for in many respects an approach based upon the Protestant principle is simply incapable of describing who Christians have actually been, what they have believed, and how they have behaved. Any dimension of lived Christianity that does not fit the pattern is simply not registered. Once again, confusion between polemical concepts and historical realities caused the latter to be perceived from a simplifying ideological angle, and the resulting picture was taken for granted by later generations as factual description.

With respect to Western esotericism, the contribution of Protestantism to the Grand Polemical Narrative has had a double effect. First, it strongly amplified the already existing practice of excluding "paganism", "gnosticism" and "magic"–domains which, however, as every student of Western esotericism knows, had just been witnessing an important revival engineered by Catholics in the half century preceding the Reformation[1] –from the domain of Christianity. And second, it promoted an approach to religion in general that emphasizes only doctrine and verbal/scriptural expression. As a result, if the excluded "other" came in view at all, not only was it automatically put in a negative light, but even more seriously, its symbolic, mythical and ritual aspects were bound to be systematically ignored, played down or "translated" into something that could be verbalized and understood in doctrinal terms. Apart from the fact that symbolic, mythical and ritual dimensions are integral parts of *any* kind of religion (including even the most extreme manifestations of Protestantism itself[2]), for our present concerns it is essential to see that the types of religiosity which had been excluded as "other" in Western culture had always been characterized precisely by a strong emphasis on those very dimensions: paganism is largely practice sup- ported by myth (and flourishing in the veneration of images), gnosticism is nothing without its rich mythology[3], magic is eminently something done and not just something believed in, and the role of images and symbols is pervasive in all these domains.

In his study of eros and magic in the Renaissance, Ioan P. Couliano has analyzed the "censorship of the imaginary" as a historical process with pro- found effects, that developed in the wake of the Reformation[4]; and one

[1] I am not aware of any major studies that explore systematically and in detail to what extent the explicit defense of "paganism" and "magic" in the wake of the rediscovery of hermetism– by Catholics such as Ficino, Lazzarelli, Pico della Mirandola and so on, and often combined with defenses of that other traditional enemy, Judaism–played a role in Protestant polemics against Roman Catholicism. On the face of it, one would expect that the phenomenon of a hermetic/neoplatonic Christianity defended by Catholics would make it an ideal target for Protestants, as demonstrating how deeply the Roman Catholic church had sunk.

[2] See e.g. the example of Calvinism briefly discussed in my 'Dreams of Theology'. Op. cit.

[3] See the discussions of "mythological gnosis" in: *Roelof van den Broek* 'Gnosticism I: Gnostic Religion' in: *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* et al. Dictionary. Op. cit.

[4] *Ioan P. Couliano*, 'Eros and Magic in the Renaissance'. The University of Chicago press, 1987. P. 193.

merely needs to think of the iconoclasm of Protestantism and its pervasive rhetoric against Roman Catholic "idolatry", to realize that the attack on images cannot be separated (except conceptually and analytically) from the censorship of religious "practice" and ritual[1]. By seeking to exclude Roman Catholicism from legitimate Christianity and include it in the pagan/magical domain of the "other", the Protestant discourse cemented its own identity as the anti-imaginal, anti-mythical and anti-ritualistic counter religion *par excellence*; and this, in turn, could not but amplify long-standing associations of "truth" with the clarity of words, and "error" with the ambiguity of images[2].

But the ascetic ideal of a religion based only on words was hard, perhaps impossible, to maintain in practice. It is significant that some of the most important innovative currents in the history of "Western esotericism" since the 16th century emerged precisely from Protestant foundations: notably

[1] See in this regard *Peter J. Bräunlein*, 'Bildakte. Religionswissenschaft im Dialog mit einer neuen Bildwissenschaft' in: Luchesi, B.; von Stuckrad K. (eds). Religion im kulturellen Diskurs: Festschrift fur Hans G. Kippenberg zu seinem 65 Geburtstag. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004. On iconoclasm, see e.g *Alain Besançon* , 'The Forbidden Image'. The University of Chicago press, 2000; *Phyllis Mack Crew*, 'Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands 1544–1569'. Cambridge University Press, 2008; *Solange Deyon & Alain Lottin* A. 'Les casseurs de l'été 1566 L'iconoclasme dans le Nord'. Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2013; *Joseph Leo Koerner* 'The Reformation of the Image'. The University of Chicago press, 2003.

[2] See Claire Fanger's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation *Signs of Power and the Power of Signs* (chapter "Inventing the Grand Dichotomy: St Augustine, Signs and Superstition") for a brilliant discussion of Augustine's ideas about miraculous versus demonic signs, with reference to his *De doctrina Christiana*. Augustine's discussion is based upon the conventional nature of signs, whose only meaningful use is 'the transfer of a *motus animi*, a concept, from one mind to another'. Demons, however, are not interested in clarity but in entrapment of human beings; and therefore demonic signs are necessarily ambiguous and violate the rational transfer of conceptual meanings:'the transfer of meaning…must some how be *incomplete* in demonic language: the intended meaning never reaches the human recipient whole, for if it did, it would not "lead" anywhere. The communication is always broken off before it is fully understood, and hence the hearer is made curious, tempted to further communication (aiming to "complete" the transfer of thought), thus proceeding farther and farther into the trap'. The demons play on human curiosity: 'The kind of appetite that leads to entrapment by demonic signifiers is *curiositas*, the perverse and insatiable…desire to know things for their own sake. One might even say that the "appetite" designated by the term *curiositas* is an appetite for signs themselves, rather than for meaning as it is embodied in signs used appropriately'. Such misuse of signs is a perversion of divine worship itself, and hence directly related to idolatry: 'the diviner, the curious or superstitious person, looks to the sign as thing rather than to the thing the sign stands for, just as idolaters look to the statue of a god, to creature rather than Creator'. Augustine points out that the rejection of idols should be extended to 'all imaginary signs, which lead to worship of idols, or worship of creation and its parts in place of God' (*De doctrina* II, 23.36). Idolatry, then, becomes a subcategory of all practices involving "imaginary signs", i.e. 'signs of imaginary things, conducive to (or the product of) fantastic imaginings, rather than reason or good sense'.

the Rosicrucian Manifestoes and the Christian Theosophical current linked to the work of Jacob Boehme both sprouted from Lutheran foundations and demonstrate that myth, symbolism and the religious imagination could flourish in a Protestant context. But it is no less true that precisely these currents, together with their Hermetic/Neoplatonic and Paracelsian origins, came to be branded as *Schwärmerei* ("enthusiasm") and heresy by mostly Protestant polemicists, and finally ended up enriching the space of the pagan-gnostic- magical "other" with new concepts, myths and images.

Ehregott Daniel Colberg's polemic against *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches* [sic] *Christenthum* (1690–1691) plays an important role here, as arguably the first book to present what we now refer to as Western esotericism as a specific domain in its own right. Colberg saw the connections that historians of Western esotericism still emphasize today: a specific type of "Platonic- Hermetic Christianity" had come into existence since the 15th century, and had further developed into currents such as Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism and Boehmian theosophy. Colberg sought to warn his readers against this danger, but only a few years later Gottfried Arnold's famous *Impartial History of Churches and Heresies* took the side of the heretics in what amounted to a counter-polemics against orthodoxy[1]. And in 1703 he published Abraham von Franckenberg's *Theophrastia Valentiniana* (orig. 1629, but not printed before): the first known apology of gnosticism[2]. Although the terminology used to refer to the "other" has always remained quite fluid and hence con- fusing, "hermetic" eventually emerged as a particularly convenient term since it could be connected to so many aspects of the field: the hermetic writings themselves, the traditional "hermetic art" of alchemy, and hence all types of *Naturphilosophie* somehow associated with Paracelsianism. In sum, as I concluded elsewhere.

[1] Colberg's and Arnold's importance in this regard seems to have been first noted by *Antoine Faivre A. & Karen-Claire Voss,* 'Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions' in: International Review of the History of Religions. Vol. 42, № 1: Amsterdam: Brill, 1995, and cf. the longer discussion in: *Antoine Faivre*, Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition. State University of New York Press, 2000. P. 11. More recently it was discussed at length in *Monika Neugebauer-Wölk*, M. Esoterik und Christentum vor 1800 Prolegomena zu einer Bestimmung ihrer Differenz. in: Aries. Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism 3, 2003. S. 127–165. See also *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*, 'The Study of Western Eso- tericism'. Op. cit. P. 490. Neugebauer-Wölk's very interesting discussion and criticism of the approach outlined in my 'Dreams of Theology', and its implications for how we look at the relation between Western esotericism and Christianity, require a much more detailed response than would be possible here. As for Protestant anti-esoteric (or more specifically, anti-theosophical) dis- course more generally, see in particular *Antoine Faivre*, Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition, Op. cit. 16–19. Faivre, seems to have been the first to call attention to the importance of Protestant polemics in the history of Christian theosophy and of Western esotericism more generally

[2] See *Carlos Gilly*, 'Das Bekenntnis zur Gnosis von Paracelsus bis auf die Schüler Jacob Böhmes', in: Broek R., Cis Heertum C. (Hrsg.). Poemandres to Jacob Böhme. Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition. Amsterdam: Pelikaan 2000 P. 416–422.

In a manner very similar to what happened in Late Antiquity, with the reification of "Gnosticism" as a distinct heretical system opposed to Christianity, the concept of a distinct system or tradition of "Hermeticism" (comprising… the entire mixture of hermetic literature, neoplatonic speculation, kabbalah, alchemy, astrology, and magic outlined above) seems to have emerged in the 17th century and to have been taken up especially in Protestant contexts. It is mainly against this background that the proponents of the Enlightenment came to present it as the epitome of unreason and superstition[1].

This new concept of "hermeticism"–in fact an umbrella term that comprises the entire "referential corpus" central to what modern scholars understand by modern "Western esotericism"–therefore emerged as a Protestant polemical concept. It is essentially a late 17th/18th-century development of the Grand Polemical Narrative whose earlier stages I have been tracing. The space originally occupied by "paganism" in the monotheistic imagination, and which later came to include "gnosticism" and "magic" in the Christian imagination, had now been further embellished by the revived and Christianized paganisms of Neoplatonism and Hermetism, various forms of Christian kabbalah, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism, and Christian Theosophy. The arts or disciplines of astrology, alchemy and *magia naturalis* had been integral parts of this compound at least since the neoplatonic revival of the later 15th century (although the sources, of course, went back through the Islamic and Christian middle ages to the Hellenistic culture of Late Antiquity); but due to their status as traditional sciences they would be highlighted for special emphasis in the final stage of the Grand Polemical Narrative, that occurred in the 18th century.

7. The Construction of the Occult: The Enlightenment against the Irrational

The so-called Scientific Revolution developed in a culture rife with religious, social and political conflict, and hence dominated by a complex variety of polemical discourses. It is usually impossible in this context to make any sharp separation between strictly scientific or philosophical polemics and purely religious ones, and hence we encounter the basic oppositions discussed above in the debates of science and natural philosophy no less than in those pertaining to theology. For the very same reason, however, the 16th and 17th centuries are *not* characterized by anything resembling the clear-cut opposition of "science against superstition" or "reason against unreason" so familiar from traditional historiography in the wake of the Enlightenment. It was simply not typical for scientists to oppose "science" against "religion" and reject the latter; instead, scientists usually saw themselves as taking the side of truth, which naturally included true religion, against whatever they saw as error. One clear illustration is the case of the witchcraft

[1] *Wouter J. Hanegraaff,* 'Introduction', in: *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*, et al. Dictionary. Op. cit.

debate. In his groundbreaking monograph of 1997, Stuart Clark explains why and how the 'reassuring story of the victory of science over magic, of reason over ignorance, and, in the sphere of demonology itself, of scepticism over belief'[1] has been thoroughly undermined by what we now know about the "scientific revolution": …men who were undoubtedly leading exponents of the new styles of natural philosophy, who championed the Royal Society, and were, some of them, fellows of it, went out of their way to insist on the reality of witchcraft and the importance of demonic activity in the natural world. On the other hand, neither of the leading critics of witchcraft beliefs who went into print in this period– John Webster and John Wagstaffe–were "new scientists" . . . Arguably the most powerful of all sceptical treatments of witchcraft was still Reginald Scot's– reissued in 1651, 1654, and 1665 but originally published in 1584, and steeped in theological, rather than natural scientific orthodoxies[2].

In other words, the traditional type of religious polemics that saw magic as based upon demonic activity remained in full force; and progressive scientists tended to continue believing in demons rather than rejecting them as figments of the superstitious imagination (as they were supposed to have done according to later historians). Likewise, in lieu of many other examples, it may suffice here to mention the famous cases (which can easily be expanded) of the practicing astrologer Kepler, or the alchemical activities of Newton and Boyle–all of them devout Christians–, to make the by now uncontroversial point that the so-called "occult sciences" were integral parts of the history of the scientific revolution. Obviously this does not mean that subjects like magic, alchemy or astrology were never targets of attack from scientific perspectives that we now recognize as "progressive" (see e.g. the well-known case of Robert Fludd, attacked by Mersenne, Gassendi and Kepler). The point is, rather, that defenders and opponents could be found on both sides of the divide (or rather, the grey area or no man's land) that divided the new science from traditional approaches in natural philosophy. Even leaving aside other considerations[3], this in itself is sufficient to demonstrate that a rejection of the "occult sciences" cannot reasonably be construed as representative of the scientific revolution as a whole.

[1] Stuart Clark, 'Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe'. Oxford University Press, 1999 P. 296

[2] Ibid.

[3] I am thinking here of the role played by the concept of "qualitates occultae", on which see *Keith Hutchinson* 'What Happened to Occult Qualities in the Scientific Revolution?' in: Isis. University of Chicago Press. Vol. 73, No. 2, 1982 P. 233–253; *Ron Millen*, 'The Manifestation of Occult Qualities in the scientific revolution' in: Osler M.J., Farber P.L., eds. In: Religion Science and Worldview: Essays in Honor of R.S. Wtstfall. Cambridge, 1985 P. 185–216; *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*. 'Occult / Occultism' in: Hanegraaff W.J. et al. Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism. Op. cit. 'What Happened to Occult Qualities', Millen, 'The Manifestion of Occult Qualities', and Hanegraaff, 'Occult / Occultism'.

Of course that revolution eventually led to the emergence of what we now recognize as "genuine science", and against that background 18th-century Enlightenment discourse–or rather, the simplified versions of that discourse which eventually, during the 19th century, came to be perceived as such[1]– did polemically oppose reason against irrationality and science against superstition or "the occult". In doing so, it could fall back on the entire existing reservoir of excluded "others" and their associated stereotypes, inherited by Enlightenment ideologues and their intellectual heirs from monotheistic and Christian polemical discourse, but now rejected for new and different reasons. From a perspective that emphasized the progress of reason over the superstitions of the past, the original "pagan" other was seen as represent- ing a "primitive"[257] stage of human consciousness dominated by idolatrous image-worship. Referred to as "fetishism" since Charles de Brosse (1760), idolatry was routinely associated with "magic", and both were seen as based upon "wrong thinking". "Fetishism" was intellectually inferior because it relied on a failure to distinguish between a material image and the concept symbolized by it; and "magic" (frequently used as a synonym for "occult philosophy" or "occult science") relied on the equally confused belief that occult "correspondences" merely imagined in the human mind reflected real connections in the material world[3]. The former type of approach clearly reflects traditional Christian perceptions of paganism and magic as "wrong religion", whereas the latter reflects perceptions of *magia naturalis* and all other "occult" disciplines as "wrong science"; and in both cases, the implicit "intellectualist" bias which takes it for granted that religious behaviour is rooted in intellectual processes is clearly a legacy of the Protestant principle discussed earlier. It goes without saying, furthermore, that the traditional association of all these domains with demonic activity strongly amplified their perception as primitive and backward, based upon the fears and delusions that had dominated human consciousness for so long and that were now finally being driven away – or so it was hoped – by the light of reason.

[1] It has become very clear in recent decades that the idealized picture of "Enlightenment discourse" as codified in historiography since the 19th century does not match – once again, for the same story repeats itself over and over again–its actual complexity. See in this regard e.g. *Christopher McIntosh*, 'The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason Eighteenth-Century Rosicrucianism in Central Europe and its Relationship to the Enlightenment'. State University of New York Press; Reprint edition, 2012 *Monika Neugebauer-Wölk*, Aufklärung und Esoterik: Rezeption - Integration - Konfrontation. Berlin, Max Niemeyer Verlag; Auflage: 1, 2009; and various contributions in: Antike Weisheit und Kulturelle Praxis: Hermetismus in der Frühen Neuzeit. Trepp A.-Ch. & Lehmann H. (hg). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Auflage: 1, 2002

[2] The negative connotations of that word were not yet obvious in the 18th century; see e.g. Court deGébelin's 9-volume Le monde primitif (1773–1782).

[3] For these approaches, see discussion in *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* 'The Emergence of the Academic Science of Magic: The Occult Philosophy in Tylor and Frazer' in: Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion, ed. Molendijk A.L., Pels P. Leiden: Brill, 1998 P. 253–275.

In sum: the space in the collective imagination occupied by the "other" of monotheism and official Christianity, which had grown and developed through the various stages outlined above, had now finally been transformed into the space containing *Das Andere der Vernunft*[1]. As such, it has exerted an incalculable influence over the academic study of religion and of culture in general during the 19th and through most of the 20th century. The Enlightenment defined its own identity by means of a polemical discourse that presented itself as entirely rational, while excluding all forms of "superstition" as wholly irrational and hence misguided[2]. And this superstition included much more than the dogmas of the church: the entire "hermetic" compound that had come to be perceived as a quasi-autonomous "current" or "movement" by Protestant polemicists around the end of the 17th century was readily available for assuming the role of the "other" of reason. An attitude of ridicule was usually most effective as a polemical strategy, but as the Enlightenment discourse developed through the 19th and especially the 20th centuries, it has often emphasized the aspects of immorality and especially of "danger" as well. This is particularly clear in the case of the various kinds of modernist discourse that perceive phenomena such as fascism and National Socialism as a return of the "gnostic" enemy and as the fatal result of a *Zerstörung der Vernunft*[3] vaguely but persistently associated with "the occult" in general[4].

As an epilogue to the above, it should be noted that the reification mainly by Protestant and Enlightenment authors of "Hermeticism" as a coherent counterculture of superstition and unreason, followed by its exclusion from acceptable discourse, forced its sympathizers to adopt similar strategies. From the 18th century on and throughout the 19th, as a by-product of secularization and the disenchantment of the world, one sees them engaged in attempts at construing their own identity by means of the "invention of tradition": essentially adopting the Protestant and Enlightenment category of the rejected other, they sought to defend it as based upon a superior worldview with ancient roots, and opposed to religious dogmatism and

[1] See *Gernot Böhme & Hartmut Böhme* 'Das Andere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants (suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft)'. Berlin. Suhrkamp Verlag; Auflage, 1985.

[2] A question that cannot be developed in more detail here is in how far Enlightenment perceptions of "religion" as such were in fact determined by it being associated primarily with Roman Catholicism rather than Protestantism, and of the former with paganism and magic (viz. worship of images,emphasis on ritual practice rather than doctrine).

[3] *Philosophen Georg Lukásc*, 'Die Zerstörung der Vernunft'. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1955.

[4] With respect to gnosticism, a very clear example is the political philosopher Eric Voegelin (see section on him in *Wouter .J. Hanegraaff*, 'On the Construction'. Op. cit. 29–36). For occultism in general, see in particular *Louis Pauwels et Jacques Bergier* Le Matin des Magiciens. Paris: Gallimard, 1960; and cf. the very useful appendix "The Modern Mythology of Nazi Occultism" to *Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke*, 'The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on NaziIdeology'. New York: NYU Press; Reprint edition, 1993.

narrow-minded rationalism. This process is part of a new kind of polemical discourse, in which self-styled "esotericists", "occultists", "magicians", and eventually "pagans" as well, self-consciously define themselves in opposition to religious and scientific orthodoxies. The rhetorics and strategies of exclusion at work here would merit a separate analysis, but fall beyond the limits I have set myself in the present article[1].

Implications

I have argued that the perception of "Western Esotericism" as a domain of research in its own right is the historical outcome of a polemical discourse that ultimately goes all the way back to the origins of monotheism, and in fact consists of long series of successive simplifications. It is by the end of the 17th century in a Protestant context that this field was first conceptualized in a manner roughly equivalent to modern scholarly understandings, and its perception as a domain different not only from mainstream religion but also from normative science and philosophy is rooted in Enlightenment dis- course. This account clearly confirms the nature of "Western Esotericism" as a theoretical construct instead of a natural term, and is incompatible with common religionist ideas according to which there exists something "essentially" esoteric. Nothing "is" esoteric unless it is construed as such by some- body for some reason.

I believe it would be too simple to attribute the traditional resistance of academics against the study of Western esotericism merely to the fact that they reject its perspectives from their own "Enlightenment" worldview, or even to the feeling that by taking such a field seriously one gives it some legitimacy. Both certainly play a role, but I would suggest that on a deeper level, the fact that–until recently–the study of Western esotericism was almost completely excluded from academic research finds its explanation in the very nature of polemics as such. The process of simplification that is basic to any polemical discourse requires that access to detailed factual information be restricted as much as possible. We know this from the role played by secrecy, dissimulation and propaganda in actual warfare[2] (whence the truism that "the first casualty in any war is truth"), and likewise, with respect to Western esotericism detailed factual information is simply not in the interest of the dominant party. I hasten to add that I do not mean this in any conspirational

[1] For short discussions at the example of "magic", see *Wouter J. Hanegraaff*, 'Magic V' in: Hanegraaff W.J. et al. Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism. Op. cit. and *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* 'How magic survived the disenchantment of the world' in Journal Religion. Vol. 33, 2003. Very interesting in this regard is the tension between "Abwehr" (rejection) and "Verlangen" (desire) analyzed by von Stuckrad at the example of (neo)shamanism; see esp. von Stuckrad, Schamanismus und Esoterik, 273–279.

[2] For instructive examples, see again *Hugh Urban* 'The Secrets of the Kingdom: Religion and Secrecy in the Bush Administration'. Op. cit.

sense[1]; what I have in mind is the simple fact that in order for any polemical rhetoric to be effective, things should be kept simple and too much information about the "other" will only create confusion. In that regard, the academic study of Western esotericism is clearly the natural enemy of the Grand Polemical Narrative–not because it chooses the "enemy's side", but because as an academic discipline it is committed to the expansion of knowledge from a perspective of ideological neutrality. Both of these principles–the pursuit of knowledge and a neutral approach–work against rhetorical simplicity and in favour of complexity. The deep irony is that precisely the eminently academic enterprise of expanding our knowledge of Western religion and culture by means of critical and unbiased research, if applied consistently, is bound to eventually expose reigning polemical narratives as mere simplifying constructs, and hence threaten the safety and stability of conventional academic identities that are built on them. Resistance against such deconstruction is psychologically understandable, but is nevertheless in direct conflict with *the* methodological principle basic to the academic enterprise as it developed in the wake of the Enlightenment (and which, in my opinion, must be preserved at all costs): the "practice of criticism", whose only commitment is to truth and which therefore cannot afford to impose restrictions on itself out of respect for any tradition or authority[2].

From the above it should be clear that, in my opinion, the importance of the study of Western esotericism goes far beyond a mere "academic interest" in some historical currents and ideas that happen to have been neglected by earlier generations. On the contrary, this domain of research should be recognized as centrally important to historians of religion and culture because it is only by virtue of excluding its basic components–as imagined in the polemical imagination–from the realm of the acceptable that Western culture as such has been able to define its very identity. If I am correct in arguing that the most essential components of that identity are at bottom polemical concepts, it follows that we cannot understand them in isolation, as if they exist in and for themselves. Instead, we need to understand the dynamics of the underlying discourse that created them; and this, in turn, requires us to try and step *outside* the latter and analyze it from a neutral point of view.

What does this entail? The very attempt (or even just the idea) of making such a step is bound to have disturbing and disorienting effects, because it commits us to a radical empiricism with profoundly relativistic implications. If we perform the "though experiment" of trying to imagine what Western

[1] See the flourishing genre of occult fiction and quasi-fiction based upon the concept that the establishment is "hiding the truth" in order to preserve its power; the most famous recent example is, of course, Dan Brown's mega-bestseller The Da Vince Code, based upon the mystifications of *Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh & Henry Lincoln* Holy Blood, Holy Grail. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982, and related literature.

[2] In this respect I adopt the approach of *Peter Gay*, 'The Enlightenment: An Interpretation': London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970. Ch. 3: 'The Climate of Criticism'.

history might look like if perceived from outside its own foundational discourse, we find that we have lost all traditional criteria by means of which we routinely privilege certain aspects of Western culture or religion as relatively "important", "central", "serious", or "profound", while marginalizing others as less important, eccentric, unserious, superficial and so on. My contention is that we instinctively tend to adhere to the Grand Polemical Narrative not only because we are so used to it (so that we seldom even perceive its presence) but also because we feel we would be lost without it: the narrative protects us from perceiving the full complexity of our own culture. Simplicity is psychologically reassuring, while complexity is hard to deal with; and the disappearance of traditional lines of demarcations will leave us in a state of disorientation. All this is entirely correct: if we can manage to step outside the Grand Polemical Narrative, nothing will look the same, the ground will seem to vanish under our feet, and the general impression will be that of utter chaos. The only solution in any such situation is not to panic but to simply start looking carefully at what is there, and see what pat- terns emerge[1].

It would of course be stupid to even suggest that, in pursuing such an approach, we should forget all the accomplishments of past research and start "from scratch". To take the most obvious example: the Grand Polemical Narrative is itself a major pattern, whose very presence is bound to emerge as extremely relevant to understanding the dynamics of Western culture. The difference is that it is now reduced to its proper status as an object for scholarly investigation, rather than being allowed to function as the latter's foundation and starting point. This in itself makes it possible for other patterns, different from and unrelated to those that follow from the Grand Polemical Narrative, to come into view as well. In the context of a radical new historiography as suggested here, "Western esotericism" will figure quite simply

[1] I am aware that the approach advocated here cannot fail to evoke associations with the basic process of psychotherapy. Since it seems to me that such parallels indeed make sense, I might as well make them explicit. As human individuals [cf. as a culture] we define our adult identity by rejecting parts of ourselves and repressing them into the realm of the subconscious [cf. the realm of the excluded "other"]. This "shadow" becomes the reservoir of who, what and how we do not want to be; but it is in fact a significant part of who, what and how we actually are. Rather than facing and confronting the parts of ourselves [cf. of our culture] that we do not want to own, we tend to project them outside ourselves [cf. "pagans", "heretics", "witches" and so on]. Any successful therapeutic process, in contrast, involves a confrontation with the contents of our subconscious and an effort to integrate them as parts of our own identity. Since such a process requires a breaking down of the barriers we have created to protect our identity and keep it stable, we naturally tend to resist it (out of a fear of chaos, disorientation, and mad- ness). But if we manage to overcome such resistance, we can gain a more complex and multi- leveled understanding of ourselves and are able to redefine our identity accordingly [cf. the radical new and far more complex picture of "Western culture" that must result if its contents are no longer subdivided along the lines of the Grand Polemical Narrative]. I freely admit that, in my opinion, such a "psychotherapy" of academic research would be healthy and desirable.

as what it is: an imaginary entity produced and reified by the foundational polemical discourse of Western culture. The gradual emergence and development of that entity in the collective imagination, and the various historical manifestations that have been subsumed under it, can then be studied in detail, ideally without distortion by quasi-essentialist assumptions and hence without artificial boundaries separating "the esoteric" from the "non-esoteric". It is true that, given the existing political, social and psychological realities, such an approach may well remain a utopian ideal, at least in its fully developed form; but the study of "Western esotericism" and of Western religion and culture generally will greatly profit if we at least start traveling in its general direction.