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Religion and the Historical Imagination: Esoteric Tradition as Poetic Invention[1]

The soul never thinks without an image.
(*Aristotle, De Anima III.7. 431 a 16*)

As recently argued by Lucia Traut and Annette Wilke, the concept of imagination has been strangely neglected in the modern study of religion and should urgently be restored to the status of a crucial 'key term' in our discipline[2]. They rightly point out that although scholars of religion are using the term quite frequently, even in the very titles of monographs[3], it tends to be treated rather vaguely and without much theoretical reflection[4]. At present, there

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

[2] *Traut Lucia; Wilke Annette,* 'Einleitung' in: Religion – Imagination – Ästhetik: Vorstellungs- und Sinneswelten in Religion und Kultur, ed. Lucia Traut, Annette Wilke: Universität Leipzig, 2015. P. 19–60).

[3] Probably the best-known case is Jonathan Z. Smith's Imagining Religion (*Jonathan Z. Smith*, 'Imagining Religion': From Babylon to Jonestown. Chicago, 1982. Stausberg, Michael (ed.). Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion. London, 2009). Other examples mentioned by Traut and Wilke are Ronald Inden's Imagining India, the notion of 'imagined homelands' in diaspora studies, and Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' (*Traut Lucia; Wilke Annette.* Op. cit. P. 17–73). A quick search on Amazon for 'imagination' / 'imagining' and 'religion' is sufficient to demonstrate how often the terminology is being used in the titles of scholarly books on religion.

[4] There are, of course, exceptions. See e.g. *Herdt Gilbert.; Stephe Michele,* 'The Religious Imagination in New Guinea'. New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1989; *Shulman David*, 'More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India'. Cambridge: MA, 2012; *Pezzoli-Olgiati Daria* (ed.) Religion in Cultural Imaginary: Explorations in Visual and Material Practices. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2015; *Wolfson Elliot R.*, 'Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism'. Princeton, 1994; *Id*. A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneriopoiesis and the Prism of Imagination. New York: Zone Books, The MIT Press, 2011; *Id*. Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania. New York: Zone Books, The MIT Press, 2014 (cf. note 7).

is no general theoretical debate going on about the imagination, its nature, its function, or its relevance to the historical, social, discursive, or cognitive dimensions of religion. There is no entry on 'imagination' in standard reference works such as Mark C. Taylor's Critical Terms for Religious Studies (1998) or Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon's Guide to the Study of Religion (2000); it is not a topic of discussion in Peter Antes, Armin Geertz and Randi Warne's New Approaches to the Study of Religion (2005); nor does it play a role of any significance in Michael Stausberg's more recent overview Contemporary Theories of Religion (2009), and it is absent from the list of entries for Stausberg and Steven Engler's Oxford Handbook for the Study of Religion (2016). Clearly, modern scholars of religion still see the imagination pretty much as a non-issue.

1. The imagination between caretakers and critics

I will be arguing in this article that the imagination should be promoted to the status of a key topic in the study of religion. To illustrate its importance, let us first take a quick look at the basic theoretical and methodological opposition be- tween 'religionist' scholars and their critics. By religionists I mean scholars of religion in the tradition of Mircea Eliade and other intellectuals historically affiliated to the Eranos circle[1]; by their critics I mean modern scholars associated with organizations such as the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR), or journals such as Method & Theory in the Study of Religion. Their basic approaches are ultimately incompatible, and both are highly influential in the study of religion as well as popular understandings of religions, especially in the United States. As is well known, religionists (the chief academic 'caretakers' of religion according to the well-known terminology of McCutcheon 2011) tend to think in terms of mythical archetypes, universal symbols, or a mundus imaginalis, and their entire conceptual apparatus relies on their highly positive understanding of the imagination as a faculty of knowledge that enables us to apprehend profound spiritual realities beyond the reach of mere rationality or normal sense experience. In short, they assume that the religious imagination is noetic, as it somehow puts us in touch with ultimate or deeper levels of reality. In sharp contrast, modern scholars in the 'critical' tradition typically argue, or assume implicitly, that gods, angels, demons, or any other spiritual entities are obviously not real but exist only in the human imagination. For them, the task of the scholar consists in piercing through the veil of imaginative fantasies and illusions to get at the more fundamental social, psychological, discursive, or political realities that actually explain religion. In short, they believe that the religious imagination is not noetic but deceptive: it prevents us from perceiving reality.

[1] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture'. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

While scholars in the critical tradition clearly disagree with religionists about how the imagination should be assessed and valued in the context of religion, one would therefore expect them at least to agree about its importance. After all, if the imagination does such a good job at confusing religious believers about the true nature of reality and making them believe in things that do not exist, then should we not try to analyze that phenomenon in depth? As already noted, however, that expectation is not borne out in practice. This is a remarkable fact, for it suggests that although 'critical' scholars see themselves as stand- ing in a rationalist and secularist tradition, they might not be aware of the central role that the imagination played in the philosophical project of the Enlightenment, from Thomas Hobbes and David Hume to Immanuel Kant. As formulated by Mary Warnock in her classic analysis of this debate, Kant had to draw the conclusion that

Without imagination, we could never apply concepts to sense experience. Whereas a wholly sensory life would be without any regularity or organization, a purely intellectual life would be without any real content. And this amounts to saying that with either the senses or the intellect we could not experience the world as we do. The two elements are not automatically joined to each other in their functions. They need a further element to join them. The joining element is the imagination … (Warnock 1976, 30)[1].

The intellectual foundations for this conclusion can be found already in Hobbes and Hume. It was therefore the Enlightenment (and not Romanticism, as is often assumed[2]) that discovered the imagination as a faculty of the mind that is crucial to our very capacity of apprehending reality and bringing order to the chaos of sense impressions[3]. To the best of my knowledge, these conclusions have never been refuted[4]. Rather, what happened is that they were expanded, reinterpreted, and taken into entirely new directions by Romantic thinkers such as Schelling, Wordsworth and especially Coleridge, who famously distinguished between the 'primary imagination' through which all of us perceive the world around us and the 'secondary imagination' that is central to artistic creativity and genius[5]. As a result of this

[1] *Warnock Mary.* 'Imagination'. Berkeley, 1976. P. 30. This is not to deny that Kant saw the role of the imagination in human cognition as a deeply troubling fact. On his ambivalent attempts to minimize and obscure its importance between the first and second edition of the Kritik der reinen Vernunft, and the significant differences between how he discussed the imagination in his theoretical and his empirical writings, see *Böhme Hartmut; Böhme Gernot*, 'Das Andere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants'. Frankfurt A.M., 1983. P. 231–250; *Kneller Jane*, Kant and the Power of Imagination. Cambridge University Press, 2007. Ch. 1 & 5; and cf. *Wolfson Elliot R.*, 2014 Op. cit. 1–2, n. 3 with further literature.

[2] Cf, *Engell James*. 'The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism'. Cambridge, MA, 1981. P. 3–10.

[3] *Engell James*. Op. cit, 1981.

[4] See e.g. *Clark Andy*. 'Whatever Next? Predictive Brains, Situated Agents, and the Future of Cognitive Science'. Behavioral and Brain Sciences 36. Cambridge University Press, 2013. 197–199.

[5] *Warnock Mary.* 'Imagination'. Op. cit, 1976. P. 66-130; *Warnock Mary,* Imagination and Time. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1994. P. 22–44.

development, we have come to assume, quite incorrectly, that imagination stands in contrast with rationality just as Romanticism stands in contrast with the Enlightenment. I would argue, rather, that if religionists take inspiration from Romantic speculation about the secondary imagination and its quasi-divine creative powers[1], scholars in the critical tradition should get more familiar at least with the Enlightenment argument concerning the primary imagination and its central role in human cognition.

What we can learn from Hume and Kant is that the imagination is the primary reality of our mental lives as thinking animals. It is only by means of our imaginative faculty that we are able to entertain 'concepts' and 'ideas' at all. Precisely how the imagination accomplishes such miracles was a mystery to Kant, and he despaired about ever resolving it: he called it 'an art concealed in the depth of the human soul whose real modes of activity Nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze'[2]. This might be a defeatist position, at least from con- temporary perspectives, for it would seem that cognitive scientists are presently rediscovering the fundamentals that were first uncovered by Hobbes, Hume, and Kant. In their groundbreaking work on 'conceptual blending,' Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner observe that cognitive studies have long been led astray by the insistence of twentieth century analytical philosophers that figurative thought should be excluded from 'core meaning.' This made them blind to the fact that, in fact, 'imaginative operations of meaning construction… work at light- ning speed, below the horizon of consciousness'[3].

[1] Perhaps partly for chauvinistic reasons, Coleridge's obscure musings on the imagination have received much attention particularly from British scholars. I would agree with Mary Warnock that although the Romantic theory of imagination is certainly of great cultural and historical importance, from a more technical and philosophical point of view it is far inferior to the British empiricist and Kantian tradition. As Warnock notes, with a fine point of irony, 'Instead of arguments, we are presented with repeated statements, obscure, dark and perhaps profound. The reason for this change, this tremendous deterioration in the rational climate, is that the sharp distinction which Kant had drawn between what could and could not be known, between legitimate thought, and impossible, empty metaphysical speculation, had been done away with' (*Warnock Mary,* 'Imagination'. Op. cit. 1976. P. 63–64). For a fascinating discussion of how Coleridge's understanding of the imagination seeks to overcome methodological agnosticism in order to create the foundation for a new kind of 'Romantic Religion,' exemplified for instance in the sophisticated esoteric philosophy of Owen Barfield, see: *Reilly Robert J.* Romantic Religion: A Study of Owen Barfield, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books 2006). Incidentally, Barfield's crucial influence on J.R.R. Tolkien, whose famous theory of faerie (*Tolkien John Ronald Reuel.* 'On Faery-Stories' in: The Tolkien Reader. New York. 1966. P. 33–99) is based upon the same foundations, makes this lineage highly relevant to Markus Altena Davidsen's research on fiction-based religion in the "Spiritual Tolkien Milieu" (*Davidsen Markus A.* 'The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-Based Religion. Diss. Leiden University', 2014).

[2] *Kant Immanuel.* 'Kritik der reinen Vernunft' (2. Auflage 1787) in: Kants Werke. Bd. III. Berlin, 1968. P. 180–181. *Warnock Mary.* 'Imagination'. Op. cit, 1976. P. 32.

[3] *Fauconnier Gilles; Turner Mark.* The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities. New York, 2002. P. 15.

Their conclusion is radical, and I would like to highlight it for special emphasis:

The next step in the study of mind is the scientific study of the nature and mechanisms of the imagination[1].

If Fauconnier and Turner are correct, then it is clearly time for us as scholars of religion to get serious about establishing the imagination as a new key term in our discipline as well[2].

2. The historical imagination as an object of research

The imagination is obviously a very large topic, with many potential applications in the study of religion and other cultural domains[3]. In this article I will be exploring just one possible avenue: that of the historical imagination as an object of research (and not, therefore, as a factor in historical research, important and interesting though that topic certainly is)[4]. My concern will be simply with how religious actors imagine history – a question that, as will be seen, is inseparable from the question of how they find meaning in it. Building upon the argumentative tradition of Hume and Kant, Mary Warnock has explained why it is that 'without imagination we could have no idea of past, present and future'[5]: that is to say, no idea of continuity in time. We give meaning to this continuity by turning the succession of events into a story: a narrative with a plot. However, this very operation is an extremely selective simplification that inevitably does violence to the infinite complexity of historical events. Furthermore, whereas any story has a beginning, middle, and end, history is different in that we all find ourselves in the middle of it and do not know its end[6]. My concern in this contribution is therefore not

[1] *Fauconnier Gilles; Turner Mark.* The Way We Think… Op. cit. P. 8.

[2] For a pioneering application of conceptual blending to the Nag Hammadi corpus, see *Lundhaug Hugo,* 'Images of Rebirth: Cognitive Poetics and Transformational Soteriology' in: the Gospel of Philip and the Exegesis of the Soul. Leiden, 2010; and cf. *Davidsen Markus A.*, 'The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach', in: Religion 46.4, 2016) (forthcoming).

[3] *Brann Eva T.* 'The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance', in: Utopian Studies. Vol. 7, No. 2. 1996. P. 222–224.

[4] The 'historical imagination' has been on the agenda of historical method and philosophy of history at least since Hayden White's classic Metahistory (*White Hayden,* 'Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th-Century Europe'. Orig, 1973, Baltimore, 2014), and arguably already since R.G. Collingwood's work after World War II. The relation between fictionality and historicity has been an object of vigorous debate in specialized journals and popular media; and even though these heated discussions may 'have given off more smoke than light' (as remarked by A. Rigney. See: *Rigney Ann,* 'Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism'. NY: Ithaca, 2001. P. 5), at least the importance of the question is generally understood by historians.

[5] *Warnock Mary.* 'Imagination and Time'. Op. cit, 1994. P. 88.

[6] *Ibid.* P. 108.

with history as such, but with religious actors who turn history into a story, or impose a story upon history.

These stories are products of the historical imagination and, more specifically, of historical memory. Memory is generally considered a sub-class of the imagination, as it allows us to picture what is no longer the case or what we are no longer experiencing. Just as our individual sense of identity depends upon how we remember our life (if we lose our memory, we literally no longer know who we are), likewise our sense of collective identity depends upon how we remember our common history. However, our memory is not a photographic plate. Like all other forms of imagination, it is an active faculty that continually recreates the past in the very process of preserving it. Just as we perceive the world 'out there' only through the medium of our imagination, we perceive history 'back then' only through the medium of our individual and collective memory. In both situations, the medium causes us to see things that exhibit highly variable degrees of accurate correspondence to the realities 'out there' or 'back then'.

This leads me to Jan Assman's concept of Gedächtnisgeschichte, or mnemohistory[1]. To explain my understanding of it – which is somewhat different from Assmann's own[2] – let me begin with a concrete example. The sixteenth-century humanist Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535/36) was remembered for many generations as a black magician in league with the devil, and among other things, this caused him to become a model for the figure of Faust in Goethe's famous tragedy. In fact, however, specialists know that Agrippa was not only a philosophical skeptic but also a very pious Christian fideist who saw unquestioning faith in Jesus Christ as the only reliable foundation for true knowledge and salvation[3] (van der Poel 1997). At first sight, we might be tempted to think of these two conflicting pictures as 'the Agrippa of the imagination' versus 'the Agrippa of history,' but this would be correct only in a very rough and imprecise sense. It is more accurate to say that while any picture of Agrippa exists only in our historical imagination, Agrippa the black magician displays a relatively high degree of non-factuality, whereas Agrippa the skeptic and Christian fideist displays a relatively high degree of factuality. Factuality and non-factuality may then be seen as theoretical polarities between which a narrative can be located:

[1] *Assmann Jan.* Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen. Munich: C.H. Beck; Auflage, 1992; *Id.* Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism. Cambridge, MA, 1997. P. 6-22; *Id.* Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis: Zehn Studien. Munich: C.H. Beck; Auflage, 2000.

[2] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'The Trouble with Images: Anti-Image Polemics and Western Esotericism', in Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others. Ed. Olav Hammer, Kocku von Stuckrad. Leiden, 2007. P. 112 *Id.* Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture. Cambridge University Press, 2012. P. 375–378.

[3] *Poel, Marc van der.* 'Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and His Declamations'. Leiden, 1997.

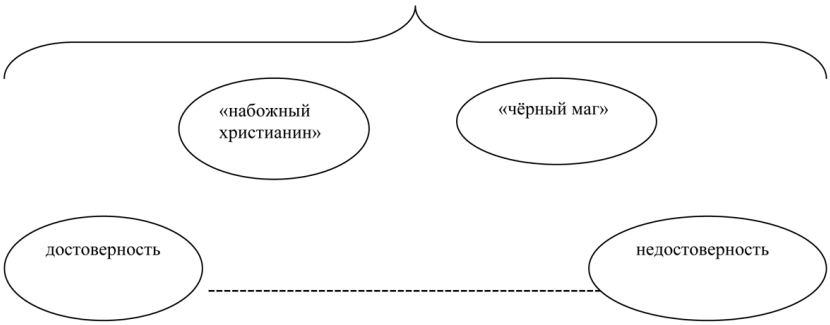

Fig. 1

The worrying fact from a historian's perspective is that the Agrippa that tends to be remembered is the relatively non-factual one, for the simple reason that he makes a good story – one that displays a relatively high degree of poeticity[1]. By contrast, the relatively historical Agrippa tends to be forgotten because his story displays a relatively low degree of poeticity. His memory is typically pre- served only by specialized historians writing for a limited academic audience.

This example was chosen to illustrate the concept of mnemohistory, which may be defined as 'the history of how we remember the past,' as opposed to the history of 'what actually happened in the past.' The relevance of this distinction lies in the fact that it is ultimately grounded in the inherent paradoxality of the imagination – a deeply puzzling feature that goes to the heart of what the imagination is all about and may be the chief reason why philosophers tend to find it so problematic[2]. The imagination never shows us the world 'out there' or 'back then' otherwise than by creating it for us in our mind, which is just an- other way of saying that it only shows us things by deceiving us about them, or reveals them only by concealing them from our gaze. Now if we focus on one horn of this dilemma and emphasize the deceptive side of the historical imagination, this will inspire us to pierce through the veil of historical fantasies in order to discover (in the famous words of Leopold von Ranke) wie es eigentlich gewesen, how things really were. This is the post-Enlightenment

[1] I am grateful to Markus Altena Davidsen for convincing me of the need to break up my original notion of 'fictionality' into two component parts. As Davidsen pointed out to me, fictionality can mean either non-factuality or poeticity (i.e. those patterns that are needed for a 'good story'), and these should be distinguished because 'factuality draws the historical imagination towards absolute referentiality/accuracy, but poeticity does not draw it towards absolute non-referentiality/non-factuality' (Davidsen, personal communication, November 27, 2015).

[2] For particularly profound and complex analyses of the religious imagination and its inherent paradoxality, see the oeuvre of: Wolfson Elliott, Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism. Op. cit. 1994 P. 204–214 et passim; Id. a Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneriopoiesis and the Prism of Imagination. Op. cit, 2011. P. 109–142 et passim; Id. Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania. Op. cit, 2014. P. 1–13 et passim.

project of classic historical criticism, or critical historiography, which concentrates on investigating the primary sources in meticulous detail and is bound to conclude (if we stick to our example) that Agrippa was not a black magician at all, but a philosophical skeptic and fideist Christian. Here we are dealing with the classic function of historiography as an instrument of Entmythologisierung.

I cannot emphasize enough that, in my opinion, such critical historiography is indispensable as the foundation for any serious historical research project, in the field of religion as well as anywhere else. Without it, we are building our houses on sand. But essential as it may be, it is structurally incomplete: it must be complemented by the practice of mnemohistory or, more precisely, mnemohistoriography[1]. Here are we dealing with the other horn of the dilemma. It is true that the imagination (like memory) is ultimately deceptive; however, it is ultimately revelatory as well, for it is only through these deceptions that we are able to apprehend reality at all! The imagination discloses the world to us in the form of creative inventions that must be studied for their own sake; and this is true for the world of realities 'out there' as well as of realities 'back then.' Perhaps most important of all, it is naive to assume that the creative products of the historical imagination simply stand over against the objective facts of history – on the contrary, they find themselves among those facts and can be studied as such. To return to our example: the multiple distortions, misunderstandings, and creative inventions about Agrippa (in short, everything – whether false or correct – that pertains to how Agrippa has been perceived) are fully part of wie es eigentlich gewesen. One might even argue that, as far as Agrippa's historical impact is concerned, these fantasies are ultimately more relevant and important than his 'real' identity known only to a few specialists. In sum, mnemohistory focuses on Agrippa as imagined and remembered. Accordingly, a mnemohistoriographical analysis of Agrippa will describe in meticulous detail how the chain of imaginative reconstructions has developed through time. Whereas Jan Assmann seems to think of mnemohistory as an independent pursuit, I would insist that history and mnemohistory must always be practiced in dialectical interaction.

3. Example 1: The story of ancient wisdom

In the rest of this article, I will focus on the role of the historical imagination in my own field of specialization, Western esotericism. My concern is with the longue durée of a series of historical currents, ideas, and practices from late antiquity to the present that share at least one thing in common: the simple fact that they were discredited and marginalized in scholarly research since the period of the Enlightenment and therefore ended up

[1] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture'. Op. cit, 2012 P. 375–376.

in a vaguely defined no-man's land beyond the established academic disciplines. In other words, as I have tried to explain elsewhere[1], the materials that we now categorize under the rubric of 'Western esotericism' can be characterized as the historical casualties of Enlightenment discourse: they represent everything (e.g. 'magic,' 'occult philosophy,' 'superstition,' 'the irrational,' or even simply 'stupidity') that the intellectual elites and the emerging academy perceived as incompatible with their own agendas of modern science and rationality and against which they therefore defined their own identity. This means that the field can be de- fined as the Enlightenment's polemical Other, because it stands for the sum total of discredited or rejected knowledge that Enlightenment thinkers felt they needed to discard in the interest of modern science, reason, and progress.

That agenda was expressed with particular clarity by the nowadays forgotten Enlightenment pioneer in the history of philosophy Christoph August Heumann. In his Acta Philosophorum (the very first professional journal devoted to history of philosophy), he wrote in 1715 that all these fake or pseudo philosophies should be dumped 'into the sea of oblivion' (das Meer der Vergangenheit) to be forgotten forever. Following an argumentative logic of destruction reminiscent of the recent assault by 'Islamic State' on Palmyra and other monuments of 'pagan' antiquity[2], he argued that no documentary source of these 'superstitious idiocies' should be preserved in libraries and archives. Their very memory had to be erased from collective consciousness[3]. This comparison with the human and cultural tragedy that is currently unfolding in the Middle East is not just random but based upon a true parallel: these Enlightenment polemics were built directly upon the struggle of monotheist religions, Christianity in particular, and Protestantism even more in particular, with the late Hellenistic complex of a broadly Platonizing religion and philosophy that may conveniently be referred to here as ancient paganism and which was understood as deeply infect- ed by idolatry[4]. For Protestant thinkers in particular, quite similarly to how 'Islamic State' looks at pagan remains, these traditions came from the devil and should be destroyed.

More specifically, and crucial to my argument here, the Enlightenment polemic was a secularist reformulation of the early modern Protestant attack on an extremely influential historical narrative that can be defined as Platonic

[1] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy…' Op. cit, 2012.

[2] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'On the Death of Khaled Asaad', 2015 Creative Reading. URL: www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com.

[3] *Heumann Christoph August*. Von denen Kennzeichen der falschen und unächten Philosophie, in: Acta Philosophorum 2. 1715 P. 179-236. See. *Hanegraaff Wouter J.,* 'Esotericism and the Academy'… Op. cit, 2012. P. 132–133.

[4] Cf. *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Idolatry', in: Rever: Revista de Estudos da Religião 5.4. 2005. URL: http://www.pucsp.br/rever/rv4_2005/ *Id.* 'The Trouble with Images: Anti-Image Polemics and Western Esotericism', in: Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others. Ed. Olav Hammer, Kocku von Stuckrad. Op. cit, 2007.

Orientalism[1]. We are dealing here with an extremely powerful historical narrative that has been operative in Western consciousness since the Patristic period and was formulated in explicit programmatic terms during the Italian Renaissance. Here it will serve as my first example of the poeticizing historical imagination and the construction of cultural memory. In what follows, I will deliberately try to present it not as an argument about historical events, but as a story (before reading on, please read this footnote)[2].

Once upon a time, in very ancient days long before the birth of Christianity, the Light of true spiritual wisdom began to shine in the East. Some say it all started in Egypt, with Hermes Trismegistus; others say it began with Zoroaster in Persia; yet others say that it originated with Moses among the Hebrews. But wherever its ultimate beginning may have been, its true source was God himself, who caused the Light of wisdom to be born in the darkness of human ignorance. The Light now began to spread, carried forward through the ages by a long succession of divinely inspired teachers, until it finally reached Plato and his school in Athens. Now Plato was much more than just a rational philosopher: he was a divinely inspired teacher of wisdom. His dialogues did not present any new and original message either: they merely reformulated the ancient and universal religion of spiritual Truth and Light. Henceforth the true wisdom was carried forward by a succession of Platonic teachers and philosophers, and this tradition finally culminated in the religion of Jesus Christ. When Christianity began to conquer the world, this should have been the glorious fulfilment of the ancient divine revelation. However, something went terribly wrong. The Christian message was perverted and misunderstood. As the Church was triumphant over its opponents, Christians were progressively blinded by power and the pursuit of worldly pleasures. And so, because of their impurity, they slowly lost touch with the ancient core of all true religion. They no longer understood that the gospel was meant to be

[1] *Walbridge John*, 'The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardi and Platonic Orientalism'. Albany, NY, 2001; *Hanegraaff Wouter J.,* 'Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture'. Op. cit, 2012. P. 12–17. Of course, this terminology cannot fail to evoke associations in any reader's mind (or more precisely, in his/her imagination!) with Edward Said and postcolonial theory, but for our present purposes it will be useful to bracket those associations. In my opinion, Said's Orientalism should be interpreted as a limited nineteenth century subset of a much larger historical phenomenon in which Platonic Orientalism plays a very major role; but that argument would lead us far beyond the scope of this article.

[2] At this point we are confronted with the inherent limitations of a standard academic format. The present article is based upon a keynote lecture delivered at the Congress of the International Association for the History of Religion, Erfurt (Germany), 25 August 2015. Having asked my audience to 'sit back and enjoy the story,' I deliberately abandoned the 'neutral' tone of voice that is appropriate for an academic lecture and did my best to shift to the more dramatizing style of a storyteller (trying to take some inspiration, here and there, from Galadriel's voice at the beginning of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings). I accompanied the story with an elaborate series of Powerpoint slides, consisting only of images to the storyline. Readers of the present article are kindly invited to try and read the story in a similar manner.

the culmination and fulfilment of pagan wisdom. Instead, they began to see all pagans as their mortal enemies – practitioners of idolatry and worshipers of demons, dangerous agents of darkness who must be annihilated in God's name. The Platonic philosophers themselves, and their ancient Oriental predecessors (those who had been the first carriers of the Light) were now perceived as teachers of the dark arts instead. And so it was that the ancient wisdom declined and its true nature was forgotten. There came a time when the leaders of the Church themselves had descended to the level of common criminals, and the very institution of the Church had become an embarrassment to all true Christians. It was at this darkest moment of history, when all seemed lost, that God himself intervened, and after the long darkness of Winter, a new Spring arrived. By the mysterious workings of Divine Providence, the manuscripts of Plato and the ancient teachers of Oriental Wisdom were rediscovered and restored to the light of day. They traveled all the way to Italy, the heartland of the Church, and were translated into Latin and the vernacular languages. Just when they were most needed, due to the miracle of printing, all the sources of ancient wisdom could now be read and studied by the multitudes, more widely than could ever have been imagined at any previous period of time. And so it is that at this darkest moment of decline and forgetfulness, God reminded humanity of the true sources of Wisdom, Truth, and Light. Surely this is the beginning of a new Reformation that will purge the Church of its errors and usher in a New Age of the Spirit. Behold the Golden Times are returning!

This is the essential story that Italian humanists such as Marsilio Ficino and his many followers were telling themselves and their readers by the end of the fifteenth century[1]. It is crucial to my argument to be clear about the high drama and emotional appeal of which a historical narrative such as this is capable – especially if it is told not with a stance of academic distance and irony, but with the moral force and commitment of a narrator who shows his sympathy with the 'Lightbearers' and their journey through history. In discussing such narratives as scholars, we sometimes risk forgetting that we are not just dealing with a theory, a theological doctrine, or an intellectual argument about history – in short, with something that neatly fits our own preferred order of academic discourse. The narrative may contain, or refer to, all those elements; but at the most basic level we are dealing with a story that is meant to speak directly to the imagination and engage the emotions. I want to insist that this is not a trivial observation. The core narrative of Ancient Wisdom had a very strong impact on the historical imagination of mainstream intellectuals from the fifteenth to at least the eighteenth century, and after its decline in mainstream academic discourse, it has continued to do so in esoteric milieus up to the present. Its remarkable power to influence discourse can certainly not be explained just by the rational arguments or historical evidence that its defenders have tried to muster in support. First and foremost, that power resides in the fact that it is a good story that appeals to the imagination and engages the emotions. Its poeticity is crucial to understanding its appeal.

[1] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy'… Op. cit, 2012. P. 5–53.

So what is it that makes this a good story? Or formulated in more technical language, what are the chief 'affordances'[1] that make it possible, even likely, for such a historical narrative about Ancient Wisdom to be accepted by readers as plausible and persuasive? We should distinguish here be- tween religious and historical plausibility. With reference to the example at hand, if readers find it religiously plausible this means that they are willing to assume that the spiritual Light is real and valuable, whereas if they find it historically plausible this means that they are willing to assume that events happened basically the way the story tells us they happened. While there is a logical hierarchy between the two (the Light could exist without the story but the story could not exist without the Light), it seems to me that the story's religious plausibility does not depend on its historical plausibility (one does not assume there is a spiritual Light because things happened the way they happened), nor that its historical plausibility depends on its religious plausibility (one does not assume things to have happened the way they happened because there is a spiritual Light). Rather, it would seem that religious and historical plausibility here both depend on the power of the story as such: one is willing to assume that there is a Light, and that this is how it has been carried forward through history, simply because the story has such an appeal. So why does it? This is a question that must ultimately be answered in terms of basic human psychology; and in order to answer it, we will need an empirical psychology of the imagination, the emotions, and their mutual interaction.

As far as I can see, the story of Ancient Wisdom has two chief affordances in view of its religious and historical plausibility, and these should be at the center of such a psychological analysis:

(1) It is marked by a clear ethical dualism, formulated not just in the somewhat abstract and always debatable terminology of 'good' versus 'evil' but visualized directly as a battle of Light against Darkness. If the story succeeds in engaging its listeners, they will identify with the Lightbearers who have been working so hard to keep the true knowledge alive, while feeling negative emotions (sadness, defiance, anger) about the forces of darkness and ignorance.

(2) Successive historical events are framed as a journey or adventure through history, in which the protagonists suffer all kinds of setbacks but also experience unexpected moments of salvation. If the story appeals to us, then we are glad to watch the sages carrying on the Light and handing it over to their successors from generation to generation; we are shocked, disappointed, and worried when the mission is betrayed by those who should have known better; we are appalled at the blindness of those who oppose the Light; we feel we want to come to the rescue of the Lightbearers who are so unjustly accused; we feel greatly relieved at the unexpected arrival of help from above; and we are inspired by hope that the forces of darkness and ignorance will not have the final word but the Light will prevail.

[1] *Davidsen Markus A.* 'The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-Based Religion'. Diss. Op. cit, 2014. P. 96–104.

4. Example 2: The story of pagan error

Having made these suggestions, let us now move on to a second example of the poeticizing historical imagination and the construction of cultural memory. Against the Renaissance narrative of Pagan Wisdom we find an equally influential counter-narrative of Pagan Error. It originated among Roman Catholic critics of Platonism such as Giambattista Pico della Mirandola and polemicists against witchcraft such as Johann Weyer, gathered momentum with Counter-Reformation intellectuals such as Giovanni Battista Crispo, and became central to the frontal Protestant assault on Platonic Orientalism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries[1]. The basic storyline goes as follows (and again, it is helpful to try and imagine it as dramatically as possible):

> Far from being teachers of wisdom, the pagan sages of the ancient Orient (Zoroaster, Hermes, Pythagoras, Plato and his followers) were teachers of darkness. They were in league with evil demons, the false gods of the heathens, who taught them the arts of magic and expected to be worshiped in hideous rites of idolatry. Far from being a preacher of Egyptian wisdom, Moses was elected to liberate the Jewish people from the darkness of Egyptian paganism. The true religion of the One God began with him, and finally culminated in Christianity. However [just as in the Ancient Wisdom narrative], something went terribly wrong at that point. In their efforts to explain the gospel in doctrinal terms, the Fathers of the Church began making use of the so-called philosophy of Plato. Seduced by the eloquence of the Platonic authors, who could speak so beautifully about God as the One source of Being from whom everything had flown forth, they did not realize that they were allowing the Christian message to get infected by the virus of pagan error: a religion of emanation that rejected the creatio ex nihilo and undermined the need for faith in Jesus Christ by suggesting that everyone could find the truth in himself. This is how the Christian message came to be poisoned by pagan errors that caused the Church of Christ to be slowly transformed into the Church of Antichrist. However, at the time of deepest darkness, when the church was ruled by criminals and even the original pagan texts were freely disseminated like never before, God sent Martin Luther to remind Christians of the true message and purify the Church of its pagan errors. In their battle against the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformers are really fighting against the demonic forces of darkness that had succeeded in extinguishing the light of the gospel and had replaced it by the false doctrines of Platonic and ancient Oriental paganism. Only when Christianity will be fully purged from the darkness of pagan idolatry will the light of the Gospel be triumphant.

Clearly, this Protestant story is a perfect mirror image of the earlier one. The teachers of light have become teachers of darkness; the so-called pagan wisdom is exposed as pagan error; Platonic philosophy is not the cure for Christianity but the cause of its decline; the rediscovery of ancient Oriental

[1] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy'… Op. cit, 2012. P. 77–152.

and Platonic manuscripts in the Italian Renaissance is not a divine intervention but an ultimate at- tempt by the devil to pervert the minds of Christians; and the Reformation of the Church does not imply a rediscovery of ancient pagan wisdom but, on the contrary, requires its final destruction.

Again, it is a very good story. As far as I can tell, its most important affordances are still the same: a sharp ethical dualism of darkness and light, and the notion of a journey or adventure through history that has many setbacks but should culminate in a happy end. The difference between the two stories clearly lies in their radically opposed valuations of ancient Hellenistic paganism in general and Platonic Orientalism more in particular, but also in the basic emotions to which they make an appeal (a point to which I will return below). The Ancient Wisdom narrative and the Protestant counter-narrative can be seen as model stories that allow many variations. In contemporary New Age culture, for instance, it is easy to see how the Renaissance model of Platonic Orientalism has morphed into a wide variety of popular esoteric and New Age narratives about the ancient tradition of spiritual wisdom carried on through the ages by lightbearers or lightworkers, ascended masters or mahatmas, who are patiently trying to awaken human beings to their inner divinity. In the world of Evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists, on the other hand, we encounter endless variations on the Protestant counter-narrative about the battle against the very real demonic forces of the occult.

I have been arguing that stories such as these – emotion-laden inventions of the historical imagination – may ultimately be more fundamental to how religion functions than verbal discourse. Critics might want to argue that it is possible to understand imaginative formations as falling within the domain of discourse, but I suggest that it is rather the other way around: human discourse falls within the wider context of the historical imagination. Linguistic signs, verbal communication, and so on, are embedded in pre-verbal thought that operates through images. We see things before we start talking about them. We are not telling stories about abstract words or concepts but about how we perceive reality in our minds. This reality may correspond either to the world that presently surrounds us (the world 'out there') or to the remembered world of the past (the world 'back then'), but in either case we perceive it only through the imagination.

5. Examples 3 and 4: The stories of enlightenment and the education of humanity

To expand the scope of analysis, I will proceed with two more examples of the poeticizing historical imagination and the construction of cultural memory. My third example is the classic 'grand narrative' of rationality and scientific progress that underpins the projects of Enlightenment and Modernity. Interestingly, it turns out to be a mixture of the two previous narratives. The storyline is familiar, and goes as follows:

> Once upon a time, in ancient Greece, the light of Reason began to shine. Rather than believing blindly in imaginative fables about the gods or accepting the dictates of priestly elites, philosophers began to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions from direct observation of the physical world. They began to build a rational worldview in harmony with the experience of the senses. In doing so, they were trying to liberate their fellow humans from the reactionary forces of mystical obscurantism, magical superstition, and religious prejudice, insist- ing on free inquiry and the quest for rational understanding. Due to their efforts, the Light of Reason began to spread. But then a new religious power emerged to oppose them: that of Christianity and its doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ alone, supported by irrational trinitarian doctrines and assisted by a powerful priestly hierarchy that sought to suppress the freedom of the human spirit. The result was a new Dark Age of ignorance and superstition that lasted many centuries. Only with the Renaissance revival of classical learning did Reason begin to make its comeback, assisted by the Reformation and its success in breaking the hegemony of the Church. As scientists began to discover the true laws of nature, thereby demonstrating the absurdity of religious prejudice, Reason finally triumphed over superstition, and human freedom over despotism. Thus the foundations were created for a better society of Enlightenment and Progress. Against the reactionary forces of religious prejudice and mag- ical superstition, Reason must and will prevail. Through rational education, the human mind can be cured of ignorance and persuaded of the truth. In the end, it is only stupidity and blindness to reason and facts that obstructs the forward march of Science and Reason.

Just as in the Ancient Wisdom narrative, the light is born in Antiquity but suffers a serious decline due to the rise of Christianity, only to be rekindled through the revival of secular (pagan) learning in the Renaissance. But of course we are deal- ing here with the light of reason, not the mystical light of spiritual wisdom. Like- wise, the spreading of the light is hindered and opposed not by a force of demonic evil but by human despotism and ignorance, not to mention sheer stupidity. Again, it is a very good story that relies for its effect on the same affordances that were noted earlier: a clear dualism of light and darkness, and an eventful story or adventure through history towards a hopeful happy end.

Interestingly, this is different with my fourth and final example of the poeticizing historical imagination and the construction of cultural memory. We have seen that the Platonic Orientalist narrative of 'pagan wisdom' stands against the Protestant counter-narrative of 'pagan demonism.' Similarly, against the Enlightenment narrative of 'rational paganism' stands a Romantic counter-narrative that relies on what might be called an 'esoteric paganism'[1]. The basic storyline is as follows:

> The history of human consciousness began in the innocence of childhood. Humanity was still living in a dreamlike state, intimately at one with Nature, under the benevolent guidance of an enlightened priesthood of visionaries and healers.

[1] Cf. *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy'… Op. cit, 2012. P. 270–277.

> The voice of divinity spoke to the human mind directly, through a poetic Ur-language of images, symbols, signatures and correspondences. Secret doctrines were transmitted to the spiritual elites through mystery initiations and mythical narratives. This original Oriental wisdom reached its culmination in Egypt, but it was through the people of Israel that human consciousness began to progress and grow through adolescence to maturity, culminating in the appearance of the absolute and universal religion of Christianity. Thanks to the Platonic tradition, the ancient wisdom of the Orient flowed harmoniously into the heart of Christian doctrine. The Middle Ages, the time of the great cathedrals and the Holy Roman Empire, were the great period of Christian splendor and harmonious unity. But spiritual evolution and progress requires strife and effort to move forward, and so the human mind had to encounter new challenges to grow further. The unity of Christendom was shattered by the advent of the Reformation, leading to an age of individualism and rational inquiry. The natural sciences tried to pierce the veil of Isis so as to discover the very mysteries of divinity itself, up to a point where human consciousness got so much divorced and alienated from the sources of true wisdom and divinity that philosophers and theologians even began to doubt the very existence of God. However, the evolution of human consciousness unfolds through history under the mysterious guidance of divine Providence, which will always take care to lead its children back on the right track even if they lose their way for a while. As the human mind reaches full maturity, the individual Self will be at one with the Self of the universe, and human beings will choose in freedom to live in harmony with the spiritual laws of divine wisdom.

Although this narrative adopts some crucial aspects of the Ancient Wisdom narrative of Platonic Orientalism, its structure is clearly very different from the ones we have seen before. The guiding idea is evolutionary: it is concerned with the steady progress of human consciousness as a whole, understood (in the terms of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing) as an 'education of the human race'[1] under the guidance of a benevolent divine force that patiently leads it to- wards full maturity. Contrary to all three previous narratives, this one is not based upon a dualistic opposition of light against darkness, for the final out- come of the process is never in doubt. The trials and tragedies of human history are ultimately just tests and challenges: they do not seriously endanger the larger process but, on the contrary, are necessary in order for it to move forward. Obviously, we recognize this narrative as 'Hegelian'; but it is more accurate to say that Hegel's philosophy of history is a primary example of a far more widespread Romantic narrative.

6. The emotions

If I have been calling attention to the role of the emotions throughout this article, it is because the theme of the imagination requires such an emphasis. The fact that feelings, affections, or passions are more easily evoked by

[1] *Lessing Gotthold Ephraim*, 'Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts'. Berlin, 1780.

imaginative representations than by strictly rational argument is a commonplace in philosophical analysis in this domain. For instance, David Hume already remarked that 'lively passions commonly attend a lively imagination'[1] and observed, in a discussion of political discourse, that 'men are mightily governed by the imagination, and proportion their affections more to the light under which any object appears to them, than to its real and intrinsic value'[2]. This phenomenon is so well known from daily experience that I do not think it is in need of any further proof. of course, these observations can easily be applied to the topic of the historical imagination as well: there is no doubt (cf. the example of Agrippa, above) that beyond the restricted circles of specialized historians, the 'real and intrinsic value' of historical data tends to take a back seat compared to how they are 'made to appear' through narrative framing. Whenever any of my four historical stories succeeds in convincing an audience, clearly this is not because it provides factual information that is perceived by them to be correct, but because the story engages the emotions.

The historical imagination can play on a very wide and complex emotional register, and of course each recipient or participant will respond differently. Nevertheless, it may be useful to ask ourselves what are the dominant emotions on which each of the four narratives relies for its effect. My preliminary suggestions would be as follows.

1. The story of Ancient Wisdom clearly relies on positive symbols of identification. First and foremost, these are meant to inspire love for the divine Light of Truth, combined with feelings of gratitude for those who have been carrying it forward through the ages. The chief negative counterpart to these positive emotions might be described as a kind of painful, melancholy sadness about the ignorance of so many human beings, their tragic failure to see the light.

2. The Protestant counter-narrative does not think in such terms of ignorance, but assumes that the enemy knows exactly what it is doing: the latter is inspired by radical evil and has the worst intentions. Accordingly, the narrative symbolism is meant, first and foremost, to inspire emotions such as fear and revulsion. To give just one example: among the most potent of such symbols en- countered in the literature is the horrific image of Platonism as a 'poisoned egg' from which a filthy breed of vermin comes crawling out[3]

[1] *Hume David*. 'A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects'. London, 1739 Bk III. 3.6).

[2] Op. cit. Bk III.2.7. Cf. *Warnock Mary.'* Imagination'. Op. cit, 1976. P. 38.

[3] *Colberg Ehregott Daniel*, 1690–91, Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum, Begreiffend Die Historische Erzehlung vom Ursprung und vielerley Secten der heutigen Fanatischen Theologie, unterm Namen der Paracelsisten, Weigelianer, Rosencreuzer, Quäcker, Böhmisten, Wiedertäuffer, Bourignisten, Labadisten, und Quietisten. 2 vols. Frankfurt, 1690. P. 91, 75; *Bücher Friedrich Christian* Plato Mysticus in Pietista redivivus; Das ist: Pietistische Übereinstimmung mit der Heydnischen Philosophie Platonis und seiner Nachfolger. Dantzig, 1699. P. 9; *Brucker Jacob*. 1731–36. Kurze Fragen aus der Philosophischen Historie, von Anfang der Welt biß auf die Geburt Christi, mit Ausführlichen Anmerckungen erläutert. 7 vols. Ulm, 1731–1736). III. P. 520-521; *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy'… Op. cit, 2012. P. 111.115. 143–144.151.

or the related image of a demonic 'seed pod' from which an end- less swarm of heresies comes to infect the world[1]. The chief positive emotions that allow its adherents to confront the horror might be described here as righteous anger and courageous defiance.

3. The Enlightenment narrative has a very different emotional tone: on principle, it distrusts mere emotion and seeks to restrain it by reason. I suggest that the feelings inspired by this narrative are essentially those of pride. In their most positive manifestation we are dealing here with the quiet and confident, happy pride inspired by true achievement; but since a sense of intellectual superiority is always implied, it has the potential of turning into arrogance. Its negative counterpart therefore consists in feelings of profound irritation and contempt for the irrational, and the stupidity of those who refuse to listen to reason and recognize facts.

4. Finally, there is the Romantic narrative, describing an 'education of the human race' from the innocent bliss of childhood to the full maturity of true knowledge. If the Enlightenment story inspires pride in human achievement, its Romantic counterpart is marked, rather, by profound feelings of awe towards the grand and sublime mysteries of Being, Creation, Evolution, Consciousness, Freedom, and the Self. This narrative is grounded in dialectics rather than dual- ism, and therefore leaves no room for truly negative emotions. However, when its adherents lose their sense of awe, and with it their belief in this whole grand de- sign of existence, one typically sees them sink into states of depression and despair. Existential nihilism is the child of Romanticism betrayed.

Of course this is just a rough sketch, without any great pretentions. The larger point at issue is that the historical imagination produces stories about the past that derive much of their persuasive power from their ability to engage the emotions. In the cases discussed here, these emotions are rooted in deep existential commitments to basic values that lie on either side of the most basic fault lines of Western culture: as we have seen, the first two narratives are all about the conflict between Hellenistic paganism and Scriptural Monotheism, whereas the third and fourth narratives are all about the conflict between Enlightenment values and traditional religion.

7. Anti-eclectic historiography

I have been arguing that the products of the historical imagination are polarized between the theoretical extremes of factuality (wie es eigentlich gewesen) and poeticity (the good story). The four narratives that I have been discussing clearly tend towards the poetic side of the spectrum. The important point to make here is that their power as stories is grounded in highly selective procedures of data selection. Enormously complicated developments

[1] *Mora George* et al. Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance: Johann Weyer, De Praestigiis daemonum. Tempe, 1998. P. 106); *Hanegraaff Wouter J.,* Esotericism and the Academy… Op. cit, 2012. P. 86–111.

and messy realities are simplified for maximum emotional effect. Grey areas of moral ambiguity are reduced to a stark opposition of light versus darkness. Even the education of the human race can only lead towards ever more light and ever less ignorance: true regression, defeat, or failure is out of the question. These are all instances of historical eclecticism: a highly selective approach to historical data, guided by a storyline that privileges emotional satisfaction and dramatic effect over full empirical accuracy, rational evaluation of all the available evidence, or historiographical precision.

In my previous work I have sought to demonstrate that Enlightenment historiography in such domains as history of philosophy, religion, and science was grounded in a deliberate, explicit, self-conscious choice for eclecticist method[1]. The job of historians did not consist in presenting their readers with all the available evidence and leaving it up to them to make up their minds: this would only confuse them. On the contrary, historians were expected to apply their own rational judgment to historical materials so as to sort the 'wheat' from the 'chaff.' Enlightenment historians were convinced that, in applying such selective procedures, they were serving the truth. In fact, however, they were doing the opposite: by promoting eclecticism as a core methodical principle, they lent legitimacy to a type of historiography that sacrifices historicity/factuality on the altar of poeticity. The result is a clear, satisfying, easily understood storyline premised on the idea of a heroic battle of science against superstition, religion against magic, philosophy against the irrational. From a historical point of view, however, this type of Enlightenment mnemohistory is in no way superior to any of the other narratives that I have been discussing: just like the 'Ancient Wisdom,' 'Protestant' and 'Romantic' narratives, the 'Enlightenment' narrative is a poetic invention with a seductive story- line that speaks to the imagination and can have a very strong emotional appeal. This is what makes it so effective in deluding us about the degree to which it is actually grounded in rational argument and factual evidence.

Therefore what we need in the study of religion is an anti-eclectic historiography[2]. Such a historiography cannot be concerned with issuing judgments about the 'truth' or 'seriousness' of human cultural products, taking positions in favor of certain traditions at the expense of sup- pressing others. Instead, it has to be grounded in a radical empiricism that welcomes all the available data as equally worthy of attention. Such a perspective has been very much 'in the air' in the academy since the 1990s at least. It obviously reflects deconstructionist critiques of how the 'grand narratives' of modernity have been guiding our perception of history and the world around us; but interestingly enough, it has also been highlighted from a perspective informed by cognitive studies in a naturalist and evolutionist framework. In her 2010 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion, Ann Taves pointed out that throughout the twentieth century, the study of religion, as well as neighboring disciplines such as psychology, have been operating

[1] *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Esotericism and the Academy'… Op. cit, 2012. P. 129–130. 140, 149–152.

[2] *Ibid.* 152, 377–378.

with artificially limited and restrictive concepts of 'religion' that were based on the tacit exclusion and systematic neglect of anything associated with magic, the esoteric, the occult, the paranormal or the metaphysical[1].

How did we come to adopt such artificial distinctions and allow them to dominate our conceptual understanding of 'religion'? I believe that the answer is simple, and rooted in elementary human psychology: poeticity tends to trump factuality in the historical imagination. We are wired to like a good story about what happened in the past and how we ended up where we are today, and our deep emotional need for a clear storyline that satisfies our personal preferences tends to overwhelm our attention to rational arguments and empirical or historical evidence. We pay attention to what interests us, while neglecting what does not, and although the resulting perspective is obviously limited and selective, we are more than willing to accept it as 'true.'

8. Concluding remarks

This might sound like a rather negative conclusion. The polarity of poeticity and factuality in the historical imagination could easily lead us to believe that while stories are exciting they just happen to be false, whereas history might be more true but just happens to be boring! I suspect that it is for such reasons that so many students of religion end up being disappointed and disenchanted once the implications of historical research and critical analysis begin to dawn on them: too often, they move from the undergraduate 'classroom of sympathy' to the graduate 'classroom of doubt' and never manage to recover the enthusiasm with which they started[2]. However, it seems to me that there is light at the horizon, for once the grand narratives have been deconstructed as poetic inventions and we recognize the paradox at the heart of the historical imagination (the fact that, as noted above, it only shows us reality by creating it for us), this makes it possible to tell a true historical story, that is to say: one that is historically accurate and exciting at the same time. The true 'hero' of such a story would be the historical imagination itself. As historians, we can trace and describe the many adventures that this hero has gone through, in his quest of grasping realities that always keep eluding him while believing in narratives that always keep deluding him. The story of that quest, I insist, is not a delusion. It is the true story of how human beings have really and actually been trying to gain knowledge, and how we keep persist- ing in the attempt. This story can never be told completely, and we are still stuck in the middle of it, but I believe it can be told accurately. It is well worth trying to tell it – for it is, of course, the story of ourselves.

[1] *Taves Ann.* 'Presidential Address: Religion in the Humanities and the Humanities in the University', in: Journal of the American Academy of Religion 79.2. 2011. P. 298–303.

[2] *Kripal Jeffrey J.* 'The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion'. Chicago, 2007. P. 22; *Hanegraaff Wouter J.* 'Leaving the Garden (in Search of Religion): Jeffrey J. Kripal's Vision of a Gnostic Study of Religion', in: Religion 38, 2008. P. 259-276.