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LINKS OF A GOLDEN CHAIN: IMAGES OF THE HERMETIC TRADITION IN ETIC APPROACHES¹

It is obvious that the name of this paper references the well-known research concept proposed by the British cultural historian Frances Yates. For Yates, the hermetic tradition was “a beautiful and consistent line of development”² of the cult of the cosmos, which accompanied the theoretical and practical system of magic concentrated in the works of the hermetic corpus. She traced this line from its beginning in late Antiquity through the entire Middle Ages to the Renaissance, when “the return to the occult was the stimulus for original science”,³ forming the basis of natural sciences of the New Age. This picture was a construct produced by Yates to explain the role and place of Western esotericism in the culture of the Renaissance.⁴ To a certain

¹ The text is translated by Ruth Addison.

² Frances Yates, *Dzhordano Bruno i gerneticheskaya traditsiya* [Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition] (Moscow: NLO, 2000), 398.

³ Ibid.

⁴ It is worth pointing out that contemporary scholars deliberately refused Yates's term “hermeticism” as applied to the history of esoteric teaching, in the same way that they refused the more widely used term “occultism”, preferring the phrase “Western esotericism”. Wouter Hanegraaff explained this phenomenon in detail in one of his works: “In the second half of the fifteenth century, in the context of the Italian Renaissance, interest was renewed in various forms of paganism of late antiquity. One example was Neoplatonism, understood by Renaissance thinkers not simply as philosophy in the modern academic sense but as a religious system, which included a type of religious magic known as theurgy. Another example was so-called hermetic philosophy, the founding works of which (known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*) were available and translated to Latin. [...] Influential Christian religious thinkers and philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola considered these sources, in essence, to be in agreement with Christian revelation. [...] Christian perception of and reflection on such non-Christian sources led to the appearance of a new syncretic spirituality, which is often called Renaissance hermeticism. [...] A syncretic spiritual movement based on the mutual enrichment of Christian and Jewish traditions was also closely associated with this new type of “hermetic” Christianity [...], the result being known as the Christian kabbala. [...] Together with Christian hermeticism, it became the basis of the Renaissance

extent she understood its conditionality. Later, researchers would refute a number of Yates's assumptions, demonstrating that there was no single line of the hermetic tradition through history.¹ But Yates was not the only author who posited that Western esotericism was a single tradition which existed throughout the history of Western civilisation. This paper attempts to summarise the history of so-called "etic" approaches within this tradition.

We should first explain that the term "etic" has no semantic relationship to ethics. It was borrowed by the linguist Kenneth Pike from phonetics, the field of linguistics which studies the sonic structure of language. The etic describes the synthesis, classification and systematisation of a certain group of data, while its opposite – the emic – describes a single, concrete element in the system. In the field of anthropological research, Pike's terms acquired a somewhat different context. The emic level of description came to mean stating assertions, terminology and concepts in the same way as the researcher's subjects. Accordingly, the etic level means stating the assertions, terminology and concepts of the researcher. Here, we will consider notions of the esoteric tradition which were formed outside the scholarly circles of Western esotericism. They have a rich history: this paper will set out only key moments, beginning with the earliest conception of the single tradition, which appeared in the first centuries of the Common Era.

Early Christianity comprised a range of scholars, combining various interpretations of Christ's mission, of the essence of the church, of humankind's place in the world and its relationship to God, and so on. One of the first stages of the formation of the boundaries of the church, with a division between orthodoxy ("right opinion") and heresy (the distortion of that opinion) was Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon's *Against Heresies*, in which he contrasted the true church with a certain false structure. In his work, the key principle of the separation of truth from falsehood was the idea of succession. According to Irenaeus, the true church could be traced back to Christ and his appointment of the apostles, who, in turn, appointed their successors, the bishops, and through this line orthodoxy and the understanding of the sacraments were disseminated. Opposed to this was another line of succession which went back to Simon Magus, who is mentioned in Acts (8:9-24). According to Irenaeus, Simon was the first Gnostic, distorting and perverting the teachings of Christ, deliberately supplementing them with pagan elements, and deifying himself. Simon also had disciples, who formed an alternative Christian line of succession. This line developed in coexistence with the Christian church and was named Gnosis by Irenaeus, who called its adherents Gnostics.

project of purified Christian magic or occult philosophy, in the context of which Christian symbolic systems were enriched with new elements derived from astrology, natural magic and alchemy." (Wouter Hanegraaff, "Dreams of Theology" in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 725–726). This diverse synthesis was named Western esotericism.

¹ For a detailed description see: Brian Copenhaver, *Magic in Western Culture: From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The aim of this paper is not a historical analysis of this concept. We will simply note that it is now the subject of much criticism. The majority of researchers believe that Irenaeus was the first to construct the opposition heresy-orthodoxy and introduced the term Gnosis to the history of thought. The idea became sufficiently widespread within late Christian theology, especially the part which was focused on apologetics, the defence of the true faith against the outside world. In the twentieth century, it acquired a clear structure in which the concept of “anticlericalism” was formed, comprising a single line of succession from the Gnostics to contemporary new religions. Normally, authors’ use of the concept of anticlericalism is based on two premises on which they have not reflected: (1) that all esotericism arises out of contact between people and evil spirits; and (2) that esotericism is a form (of education?) which has a long history and a “tree-like” structure. Such authors attribute the beginning of esotericism to the alternative way of life which the serpent proposed to Adam and Eve in Heaven: “and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). The idea of being god without God personifies esotericism. And as its beginning lay in direct contact between humankind and Satan, all subsequent manifestations are based on the renewal of this contact. Renewal is consolidated within the bounds of secret societies, which derive from the pre-Christian era, but continue to exist legitimately through Gnosticism, the medieval heresies, the Rosicrucians, the freemasons, theosophy, anthroposophy, and so on, up to contemporary new age representatives. Consequently, within contemporary Christian apologetic literature, the idea of a shadowy (in relation to the church) tradition of secret societies is almost normative. This idea has, evidently, influenced the origin of untheological theories in which the question of the esoteric tradition is posed in the same way.

One of the first such theories was devised by Carl Jung, who researched various aspects of Western esotericism over many years. This research was directly related to his theory of the collective unconscious. Jung understood the collective unconscious not as a field common to everyone, like the spiritual world, but as a system of form-images which all people possess and which are expressed as archetypes. The presence of such images for everyone makes them not only collective but sees them manifested as dreams and forces people to express them in mythological form. Dream and myth share a certain common pattern, which lies within a person, and it is this pattern which is the content of the collective unconsciousness. Jung spurned Freud’s extremely reductionist rationalism, which removed from the sphere of serious research philosophy, religion and anything which he could not explain: everything which works primarily with mythological images. To spite Freud, Jung wanted psychology to become the foundation for a union of all systems of human knowledge and to overcome fragmentation and disunity. For Jung, Western esotericism was an important part of the development of humankind and, for him, its main problem lay in the fact that, over the centuries, the minds of the new era tirelessly ignored it.

Jung drew up a whole philosophical history, combined with his psychological theory. In this historiosophy, Christianity was allotted the place

of consciousness and esotericism the unconscious. If one recalls Freud's scheme of psychological recovery—"Where Id was, Ego shall be – then it is obvious that for a culture to heal it must acknowledge its unconscious, marginal baggage. Jung sets out a line of succession from the Neoplatonists and Gnostics of the first centuries of the Common Era through alchemy to the spiritualist, mesmerist and neo-gnostic movements of his time. He characterized the situation as follows: "From 1918 to 1926 I was seriously interested in the Gnostics, who also touched on the world of the unconscious, addressing its essence, which evidently sprang from the nature of instinct. It is difficult to say how they got to that point as there are very few surviving proofs and most of those are from the opposing camp, the church fathers. I doubt that any kind of psychological concepts could arise among the Gnostics. Their aims were too far from mine for any kind of link between me and them to be observed. The Gnostic tradition seemed to me to be interrupted. For a long time, I could not build any sort of bridge between them or the Neoplatonists and modernity. Only when I began to study alchemy did I observe that it is historically linked to Gnosticism and that thanks to it there appeared a definite succession between the past and the present. With its roots in naturo-philosophy, medieval alchemy became that bridge which, on one side, related to the past and the Gnostics and on the other to the future, to contemporary psychology of the unconscious".¹ This quote demonstrates that Jung's psychology was intended to include a procedure for healing humankind through the integration of the unconscious (gnosis) and the conscious (Christianity). It is worth noting that the esoteric tradition plays an extremely important role in his psychological theory. In essence, it is the unconscious of humankind, displaced as a result of the historical process and expressing itself in the neurosis of enlightened rationalism, which resulted in a series of cataclysms in the history of the twentieth century. Such a vision of the esoteric tradition had considerable influence on the Eranos circle, formed at Jung's behest and including, in particular, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem and Henry Corbin. In many ways, circle members saw their participation as a form of continuing the work of the ancient Gnostics. It is no accident that Corbin suggested for them the slogan "Heretics of the world unite".²

After Eranos, the study of esotericism went in various directions, but in the last decades of the twentieth century the majority of researchers came to the conclusion that it is not possible to speak of an unbroken line of tradition within Western esotericism, because the phenomenon is contradictory, heterogeneous and can be considered a construct which appeared in historiography. However, not all contemporary researchers refused the idea of tradition. The American author Arthur Versluis devised an original conception of succession through text.

¹ Carl Jung, *Vospominaniya, snovideniya, razmyshleniya* [Memories, Dreams, Reflections] (Kiev: Sinto: 1994), 173.

² Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 31.

For Versluis, the entire Western esoteric tradition has two basic components: “1. Gnosis or gnostic insight, i.e. knowledge of hidden or invisible worlds or aspects of existence (including cosmological or metaphysical gnosis); 2. Esotericism, meaning that this hidden knowledge is either clearly prescribed for a relatively small group of people or implicitly, autonomously limited by its complexity or subtlety”.¹ If the second component is understandable on a particular level – esotericism is the realm of closed groups of adepts and as such is in contrast with religions which are open to all – the first, gnosis, requires explanation. Versluis believes that it is this characteristic which defines esotericism as a phenomenon.

Gnosis is considered here in the original meaning of the term: not as knowledge received as a result of study of an external object, not as a collection of data, but as the experience of spiritual communication with another higher reality. In this way, knowledge is understood as an experience of that which is cognised. Experience gives knowledge and knowledge is experience. Gnosis is heterogeneous. It can be divided into two types: cosmological and metaphysical.

Metaphysical gnosis is defined by Versluis as “insight into the divine”,² and it too is divided into two types: visionary (corresponding to the *via positiva* of Dionysius the Areopagite) and unitive (corresponding to the *via negativa*). “The *via positiva*, or visionary approach, goes through images and the field of the imagination; the *via negativa*, or unitive approach, is the falling away of all images”.³ Accordingly, metaphysical gnosis gives rise to multiple poetic and artistic representations of the internal experience of the visionary, the source of which is the world of the imagination. These representations communicate the unique knowledge of the Divine which the visionary receives through gnosis. Cosmological gnosis is in itself called upon to carry definite knowledge of the fundamentals of the universe and is defined by Versluis as “insight into the hidden patterns in the cosmos”.⁴ It opens up to experience the truly deep foundations of the world by experiencing that world and finds its reflection in such teachings as alchemy, astrology, hieromancy, geomancy and so on. Versluis stresses that his proposed division of gnosis is to a certain extent tentative and all its variety comes down to the single principle of experienced knowledge of the Supreme Being.

In this way, Versluis actually speaks of the existence of a certain “esoteric tradition”. He postulates gnosis as humankind’s experience of knowledge of a higher reality and, accordingly, he postulates that this Higher Reality actually exists. Versluis confirms that he knows of contemporary lines of thought which plainly state that there is no link between various teachings

¹ Arthur Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (Lanham: Rowman Littlefield, 2007), 2.

² Arthur Versluis, *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, and Consciousness* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 27.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

and groups within Western esotericism. He completely the arguments which demonstrate that such links are impossible, but considers that precisely because of their refusal to understand esotericism primarily as a particular type of spiritual experience, earlier scholars could not propose another form of existence for the golden chain (*Aurea Catena*) of adepts.¹ Versluis names this form ahistorical continuity,² the existence of which is possible thanks to initiation through text. Versluis notes that “if the term initiation is taken to mean the awakening of higher levels of consciousness, then the written word can serve this function. [...] It seems obvious that poetry is intended not simply for description but also for awakening those types of consciousness which it expresses. I consider such an awakening to be an initiation”.³

Versluis thinks that the basis for understanding a text in the “Western esoteric tradition” is a story from the Book of Revelation in which St. John, before beginning to describe his recent visions, eats a book, which he is told by an angel “shall make your belly bitter, but it shall be in your mouth sweet as honey” (Revelation 10:9). Versluis interprets St. John’s eating the book as receiving internal knowledge or, in his words, “gnosis”: it is the receiving of this knowledge which enables his readers to understand the Revelation. In other words, according to Versluis the Book of Revelation contains the possibility of initiative experience, opening up to the reader the essence of the book in the same way it was opened up to St. John. This is how gnosis spreads within the “Western esoteric tradition”, creating the tradition in this way. According to him, initiation is not a rite of passage, but the acquisition of internal knowledge through reading literature created by gnostic authors who embedded in the book the possibility of such an experience for the reader.

One of the American author’s favourite comparisons is the parallel between Buddhist *koan* stories and initiation through text. A *koan* is a completed, lexically formalised expression which enables those meditating on it to have a concrete spiritual experience of Buddhist enlightenment. Versluis stresses that *koan* stories are far from irrational. They have two layers: the everyday reality of the human world (expressed through language) and the reality of the other world (grasped through the experience of meditation on the *koan*). In the West, in the absence of real initiatory traditions in literature such as the *koan*, the two layers of existence – the everyday and the sublime – combined. A reader of such a text through the achieved the sublime via the everyday level and, in this way, became part of the golden chain of knowledge accessible only to adepts, or gnosis.

Versluis is not the only contemporary scholar to have examined the phenomenon of the unity of esotericism. Ioan Petru Culianu, Elaide’s successor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, also put forward a theory regarding the unity of Western esotericism, but he suggested that the path of unity lay not outside (dependent on the form of organisation of society

¹ Ibid., 58.

² Ibid., 142.

³ Ibid., 141.

or of receiving information) but inside a person. The stimulus for this theory was Culianu's interest in the history of dualistic teachings in the West. In his 1992 work *The Tree of Gnosis*, he decided to subject it to detailed analysis. Unfortunately, due to his tragic death, this was also his final analysis. In this work, Culianu elaborated a particular morphodynamic theory of religion, within which the key point was once again the history of gnosis, as a fundamental teaching for understanding the dynamics of the history of Western religion.

Culianu's teacher, Ugo Bianchi, had posited the idea of defining gnosis as a system of invariants based on Levi-Strauss's structuralism. Believing that anti-cosmic dualism was one of the fundamentals of gnosis, he formed an entire theory of dualistic movements – from Gnosticism to Catharism – which shared the ideas of anti-cosmism, anti-somatism, reincarnation, Encratism and Dochetism. But Culianu was not wholly in agreement with Bianchi's theory because detailed research into Gnosticism had led him to observe numerous subtleties, including those which demonstrate that “some Gnostic doctrines, whether we define them as dualistic or not, are not ‘anti-cosmic’, they limit themselves to attributing the creation of human ecosystems to lower powers [...]”.¹

The main problem for researchers of all types is to explain the fact that in Gnosticism one finds numerous mythological, doctrinal parallels with Judaism, Christianity, Platonism and other contemporaneous religious and philosophical systems. Earlier scholars tended towards the idea of diffusionism, in which separate cultural influences are formed as a result of the convergence of ideas and stories from various cultures. Another version of this approach is more straightforward and suggests that traditions are borrowed from other systems, in some cases proposing the existence of a chain of succession. Culianu did not accept either explanation. One can endlessly seek parallels, and a painstaking researcher can find them easily, but their existence is not evidence for real contact between cultures and their mutual influence. For Culianu, the key to the similarities of various teachings lies in humans. They are a single species, with a single system of thought which has a single set of mechanisms and, accordingly, the cultural and religious traditions humans engender may also have similar characteristics, even if they did not intersect historically. As an interesting example of the systematic nature of the development of religious ideas, Culianu cites the history of Christological disputes, which charts the path of a choice between two logical oppositions: God and man. Their correlation, combination, consolidation and division produced the variety of Christological teachings which formed the life of the modern and ancient churches. Culianu believes that the explanation lies not in transcendentalism but in the human mind, the logical thought processes of which are always inclined to choose between the alternatives offered. However, one can also not choose

¹ Ioan Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis: The Untold Story of Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 56.

but “dogmatise the paradox”,¹ a route taken by the undivided orthodox church. The human brain can take this route at any moment: the discussion of Christology with Chicago students led Culianu to observe that even seminar participants with little knowledge of history reproduced the same kind of views in relation to God and man in Christ and reopened up virtually the entire spectrum of Christological teachings based only on their own reason.² According to Culianu, a similar story took place with Gnosticism and with all other religions.

This happened with Western esotericism. For Culianu, within Western thought Gnosticism was a type of ur-teaching, which changed its masks and forms and could be found through the entire history of Western culture. He saw the history of religion as an area of incessant morphodynamics, in which the diverse original elements of humankind’s myths and notions about itself and the world were mixed in various combinations, producing a multitude of religious teachings. Gnosticism was one of the first such mergings in the history of Western culture. Culianu notes that “Gnosticism is not a monolithic doctrine but simply a set of transformations belonging to a multidimensional, variable system that allows room for illimitable variation. This system is based on varying inherited assumptions which are stable but open to interpretation, among which the myth of the Book of Genesis is the most widely distributed. [...] But Gnostics do not found a real tradition, based on hermetic succession and, in some way, they can be defined as ‘invariants’”.³ Can we speak about Gnosticism as a single phenomenon? Thanks to Culianu, we can. Or, rather, we cannot essentially define Gnosticism as something whole, but we can identify those revolutionary ideas which it introduced to culture in the first centuries of the Common Era, thus separating itself from other religious and philosophical movements of the era. According to Culianu, such features are rejection of two fundamental principles: “the first being the criterion of ecosystemic intelligence, the degree to which the universe in which we live can be attributed to an intelligent and good cause. The second is the anthropic principle, the affirmation of the commensurability and mutual link between human beings and the universe”.⁴ To these features one can add the single method of interpreting bible stories used by all Gnostic trends, a method the scholar calls “inverse exegesis”.⁵ In this interpretation, everything which has a positive character in the Bible is turned inside out and, in Gnosticism, has a negative meaning. The opposite is also true: that which is censured in the Bible is extolled in Gnosticism.

¹ Culianu notes that “Gnostics were more intellectually creative than their Christian opponents, who finally, and particularly when they had achieved sufficient power, decided to canonise the unresolved paradox of their belief”. (Ibid., 242.)

² Ibid., 244.

³ Ibid., XIV.

⁴ Ibid., XV.

⁵ Ibid., 121.

However, the dualistic teachings which exist in the history of the West do not fully comply with early Gnostic principles, and are their invariants. Manicheism, for example, shared almost all of its basic features with Gnosticism, but diverged on the idea of the ecosystemic principle. The Bogomils were never dualists. According to their teachings, the first elements, from which animate creatures appeared, were created by God and not the Devil. Our material universe is not the fruit of evil and, accordingly, in Bogomil theology there were no two sources which were in fact equal and coexisted in the form of incessant struggle. Such a view is inherent in Manichaeism, many Gnostic teachings and Paulicianism, but not in Bogomilism. In producing a colourful myth, elements of which are extremely similar to Gnosticism, the Bogomils did not create a strictly dualistic theology. In essence, they were not dualists and did not continue the line of succession from Gnosticism. There is a similar story with the Cathars, who were neither a continuation of Bogomilism nor a form of Gnosticism. According to Culianu, Cathar theology is reminiscent of Origen's thought. In fact, it is so similar, that the Chicago divinity scholar even writes of "the rebirth of Origenism in radical Catharism".¹ The Cathars were also no dualists, because in that world the Devil's work takes place with God's permission and, consequently, there can be no word of two sources.

This whole picture, with numerous invariants, demonstrates that for Culianu all human activity, whether religious, scientific or cultural, functions according to the principles of a game of chess, in which it is constantly necessary to choose from a multitude of possible variants. Theoretically the game can last for an infinite amount of time, but in life one very important factor always interferes: power. It is power which stops the game when a move begins to change the system of life. These ideas then become heretical and are subject to persecution. Blood is spilled, and Culianu is surprised that, in fact, "so much blood was shed for so little. All of these ancient heretics, unlike us, lived and died for a truth which was just one of a number of possible choices. [...] Their only sin was *thinking*. [...] Having lost in history, they lost not a game of minds but a game of power".²

Accordingly, in the theory of morphodynamics we meet an uncompromising, reductionist model which completely rejects theories favoured by Jung and Versluis: of spiritual inspiration, the link to other realities, particular conditions of consciousness and a single, timeless Gnosis. For Culianu, everything is explained by the human brain, which functions according to the principles of a computer on which there is loaded a chess programme with the maximum possible number of variants. The external factor of the machine of compulsion interrupts the game at the point when the players become too engrossed. That said, with the help of this theory, Culianu explains why representatives of the etic and emic points of view considered the existence of a tradition of succession of secret knowledge to be possible.

¹ Ibid., 229.

² Ibid., 240.

The unity of the human mind and the way in which it functions were a guarantee of the realisation of such unity.

It seems that this digression into the history of the etic understanding of the existence of a single tradition in Western esotericism could be continued further, but our aim was simply to outline the basic landmarks in the history of religious studies in the twentieth century. This overview might be summed up as follows. At this time, there is no general agreement on the essence and functioning of the esoteric tradition, although the majority of contemporary scholars do not believe that it comprised an unbroken line of secret societies and adepts initiated into them. However, the idea of such a tradition has long become culturally established and this concept has been fertile ground for both mass and high art. Accordingly, from the point of view of cultural history, it is not so important whether a single golden chain of secret teachings exists, but that its image has played a defining role in Western culture.