

## PREFACE

It is still often regarded as self-evident that western culture is based on the twin pillars of Greek rationality, on the one hand, and biblical faith, on the other. Certainly, there can be little doubt that these two traditions have been dominant forces in cultural development. The former may be defined by its sole reliance on the rationality of the mind, the latter by its emphasis on an authoritative divine revelation. However, from the first centuries to the present day there has also existed a third current, characterized by a resistance to the dominance of either pure rationality or doctrinal faith.

The adherents of this tradition emphasized the importance of inner enlightenment or gnosis: a revelatory experience that mostly entailed an encounter with one's true self as well as with the ground of being, God. In antiquity this perspective was represented by Gnostics and Hermetists; in the Middle Ages by several Christian sects. The Cathars can, at least to a certain extent, be considered part of this same spiritual tradition. Starting with the Italian Renaissance of the late fifteenth century, the newly discovered "Hermetic philosophy" rapidly spread all over Europe. It found many adherents, in particular during the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. This so-called *Hermeticist* tradition and its later developments—the whole of which may referred to as "western esotericism"—was characterized by an organic view of the world that assumed a strong internal coherence of the whole universe, including an intimate relationship between both its spiritual and its material elements.

The scientific mechanization of the world, the doctrinal consolidation

of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the rationality of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century made the Hermetic philosophy, with its strong connections to alchemy, magic, and astrology, scientifically backward and religiously suspect. Nevertheless, the hermeticist current took on new forms in Rosicrucianism and Christian theosophy, and continued to flourish in secret associations such as Freemasonry. Thus, it continued to have a strong impact not only on philosophers, mystics, and occultists, but on many writers, painters, and musicians as well.

In our own time many people, disappointed in the perspectives on humanity and the world offered by either rationalism or traditional religion, turn again to the basic principles of Gnosticism and Hermeticism, often integrated with some kind of New Age thinking.

The academic study of these developments is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Most literature about the various aspects of “western esotericism” has traditionally been of an apologetic or polemic nature: a debate, basically, among believers and their opponents. Academic researchers generally tended to avoid an area of cultural expression that was widely regarded as inherently suspect; openly to express interest in these traditions might too easily endanger a scholar’s prestige among colleagues. During the last few decades, the realization has been growing that this attitude has little to commend it from a scholarly point of view, and may on the contrary have blinded us to important aspects of our cultural past. Even more importantly, it has become increasingly clear that the scholarly recovery of “esoteric” traditions may eventually force us to question basic received opinions about the foundations of our present culture.

These considerations apply most directly to those movements that developed in the wake of the Hermetic revival of the Renaissance period. The scholarly study of ancient Gnosticism and Hermetism has been accepted and taken seriously for much longer. This should not surprise us, if we take into account the battle between doctrinal Christian theology and Enlightenment rationality that began around two centuries ago. An impartial—instead of polemic—historical study of Gnosticism is potentially dangerous to the self-understanding of traditional Christianity and its modern representatives. It held little threat, on the other hand,

to the liberal theologians, Bible critics, and religious historians who increasingly came to dominate the academic study of Christianity. On the contrary: the historical study of Gnosticism could serve these scholars as a useful means of undermining the claims of their more conservative colleagues.

The situation was entirely different with respects to post-Renaissance “Hermeticist” movements. Not only were these less distant in a strictly chronological sense, they were also much closer in spirit. Having flowered in the same period that saw the emergence of modern science and rationality (and having been, as we now know, crucially involved in that emergence) they evidently touched upon the very roots of modernity itself. If Gnosticism had traditionally been perceived as the enemy of established Christianity—exemplifying what were regarded as essentially pagan temptations—modern Hermeticism held a comparable position in relation to the newly established rationalist worldview. To the intellectual heirs of the Enlightenment, it appeared very much as Gnosticism had appeared to the early church fathers: as a collection of archaic and potentially dangerous superstitions. They were regarded as the epitome of those kinds of error from which human reason had now finally managed to free itself.

However, one openly fights an enemy only as long as one fears that he still might win. In this respect as well, history seems to repeat itself. Like the Christian Church before it, modern rationalism, once safely consolidated, could afford itself the luxury of exchanging active combat for a more comfortable (and perhaps more effective) solution: silence. Believing in the inevitable progress of human rationality, one could simply ignore esotericism, in the confident expectation that its still surviving remnants would eventually wither and die by itself.

However, even if one avoids the use of currently fashionable labels (most of which seem to begin with “post-” and to produce book titles beginning with “Beyond”), it is clear that the optimistic self-confidence of Enlightenment thinking is no longer widely shared. Together with growing doubts about the doctrine of human progress through science and rationality, we witness a new interest in historical alternatives to the dominant components of western culture. It is only natural that the study of Gnosis and Hermeticism profits from this widespread reorientation. It is the conviction of the editors of this volume, nevertheless, that in

this newly emerging domain scholars should try to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Even if the academic study of "Gnosis and Hermeticism" (in the comprehensive sense employed here) may gratefully ride the current wave of a popular search for alternative sources of meaning, it should not once again allow itself to be put into the service of covert religious or ideological warfare. It is the task of historical scholarship faithfully to describe and interpret "what has been," as well as "what is." It should not see it as its calling, however, to prescribe "what should be." Accordingly, this volume intends to introduce the reader to what has sometimes been called "the third component of western culture," leaving it to that reader to make up his or her own mind about its inherent merits, or about its possible contemporary relevance.

The chapters of this volume originated as lectures given at the Amsterdam Summer University in August 1994. In line with the historical orientation of the book, we have attempted to arrange the different contributions so as to produce an unbroken chronological story, in which each chapter builds upon and develops from preceding ones. At the same time, the volume as a whole definitely intends to be more than just introductory. All the contributions are based on new and original research, which not seldom happens to challenge accepted interpretations and to propose new directions for future research.

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