

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again: Themes from Antiquity to Post-Modernity

Garry W. Trompf

In a worthy Tolstoyan view of history, individuals, even clusters of them, do not have control over the great transformations of human affairs (let alone immense environo-human processes). Knowledge of what has gone on will always be provisional, if not patently inadequate, and no one person or coterie can ever possibly have command of it. Nowadays we find that universities - as the putative institutional embodiments of knowledge - fairly reek of special-ization, and over the generations more and more people have been employed to handle aspects of a virtual infinity that can only be shared by many, never fully encompassed by the one or the few. Joseph Needham may have put his name to the great multi-volume work *Science and Civilization in China*, but a team was needed for the job, and people with linguistic expertise in specialist discourses besides. And Needham was the theorist who gave us the 'cake' model of knowledge - that there are (unspecified numbers of) slices to it, with only some of us being able to digest more than one piece, and only someone of great arrogance (a God-pretender?) attempting to consume the whole.¹ On a Needhamian reading, of course, no one could deny that every part will give you a taste of 'the all', but a more sensible humility will force us to accept the inevitability that every conceived item or exposition of knowledge is 'reduced' *scientia*.

But this is to present matters more as a child of information technology - as if all knowledge bits are to be flattened out and picked up from an endlessly moving *tabula mobilis* - an intriguing configuration of DNA here and comparative notes on modern gorillas

Some parts of this article were first presented in a paper to the XIth Conference of the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, on 'Orthodoxy and Unorthodoxy', Macquarie University, Sydney, 16 July, 1999.

¹ Joseph Needham, esp. *Moulds of Understanding: A Pattern of Natural Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1976.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

and palaeolithic hominids there. In an ivory tower it is easy to lose sight of the bearing knowledge possesses for basic practicalities, even survival techniques, in everyday life. Certainly from a practical (but even also theoretical) point of view, moreover, simply possessing a repertory of *disiecta membra*, or imbibing a plethora of encyclopaedic details, will yield slender results, for conceived components of knowledge (or 'facts') point beyond themselves to a rationale of knowing. At one preliminary level, the reasoning may be techno-practical. One would like to apply what one knows. There is a task to be done; it is therefore better to set aside what is (apparently!) inappropriate to the job and focus on the pressing matter at hand. And we do not have to be talking about farmers or builders here. Even a proficient academic can approach both the theory and practice of teaching this way: there is a prior understanding that 'the subject' should be taught in such-and-such a fashion, with a given modicum of digestible details. To be able to grasp what to do as appropriate in given situations may present to us as an 'understanding' of things - for a transition from 'declarative' to 'implicit learning' has been achieved in the brain¹ - but this is really only a knowing the 'mechanical details' and just 'the beginning of wisdom'.

Readers will only be too well aware after contemplating the subject-matter of this whole book, though, that there is a more-than-just-pragmatic point to knowledge that early and unavoidably impresses itself upon us. There is a more general arena beyond that applied know-how to fulfil specific tasks. Since all cultures sociologize their members into some sense of good and bad, the question will arise contextually as to whether knowledge (skills, even strange formulae included) is being used for *benefit* or *ill*. And in this discernment we can appreciate why the mere naming of things - the knowledge-itemization of the world, or even the ability to manage it practically - is (qualitatively) different from 'the knowledge of good and evil', as the Hebrews' *Genesis* famously has it; and also see how an introduction of evaluative

¹ For background, G.B. Madison, *Understanding: A Phenomenological-Pragmatic Analysis*, Greenwood, Westport, Conn., 1982, esp. ch. 9; E.R. Kandel and R.D. Hawkins, 'The Biological Basis of Learning and Individuality', in J. Piel *et al.*, *Mind and Brain: Readings from Scientific American*, Freeman & Co., New York, 1993, p. 42.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

guidelines suggest a more important point or *raison d'être* for knowing than straightforward utility provides. Knowing 'that' and 'how', one discovers, is not enough without knowing whether the consequences are 'good' or not. Musing on such commonly shared ethical implications, indeed, may conduct some exploratory souls further to a more particular mode of reflection about knowledge, one shared by a pondering few.

Prima facie, we are now beginning to address decidedly *theoretic* approaches to knowledge that only a cultural minority of gifted minds have the time and energy to manage. Yet here we can see, by anticipation, that we are not concerned with theory conceived as a mere neutral extension of facticity - as if finding the right *method* for sorting out the data, or arriving at the right selection of *relevant* matters (rather than just *notarialtier* or 'bits and pieces for noting'), will automatically follow from assembling information. It is arguable that no method or selectivity ever escapes from a qualitative assessment, and even deciding what a fact is in almost every case implies collective values that have been passed to peoples over the centuries. The point is, once reflection upon how or what we know occurs, the issue as to what *true* knowledge is will then arise (or should!), and this compulsion to grasp trueness inevitably encompasses ethical and qualitative judgement. The problem about truth, however, is that restless or (can we dare to adjudge?) more probing minds will not be satisfied with what appears as a limited trueness - or something that is true because it 'works' (and thus perhaps bears survival use) or because it is argued better (the 'relative' truth of *sophisticated* discourse). They are in pursuit of *the* Truth; and it is here where high-philosophic, mystico-religious and esoteric outlooks seem to converge on a common goal - and sometimes to quite overlap.

In the Western history of thought it is almost conventional to find the *locus classicus* of the high-philosophic quest for true knowledge in Plato's parable of the cave (*Respub.* VII. 514-8). Those who are chained within the cave, we will recall, live in illusion (*phluargia*) and can only guess at what is going on in the world from shadows moving on the wall; those closer to the opening, but between light and darkness, are caught making constant evaluations - in a world of opinion (*doxa*), if you like (cf. 533D) - in a less limited position; while those in the light know what is true (*alêthês*), though realizing that their knowledge

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

(*epistêmê*, cf. 533C; or *gnôsis*, cf. 484C) comes through a prior indwelling 'power of the soul' (*dunamis en tē psychē*) (518C). Interestingly, the light imagery might imply that knowledge is public, exposed and open; alas, however, most people are said to be locked in darkness; and, as the ancient Indian philosophers comparably put it, they would have to sit at the feet of a teacher to avoid the effects of *mâyā* (the divine power of illusion) and find stable *vijñāna* (stable inner understanding, cf. *Brihad. Upan.* II,v,19b; III,iv,2). As for the mystico-religious, nowhere could one find a more influential statement of the relevant quest than a saying attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Evangel, that 'you shall know the truth (*alêtheia*) and the truth shall make you free' (Jn. 8:32).

Yet since in this Gospel Jesus is founding saying 'I am the Reality (*alêtheia*)' (8:46), the radical implication presents itself that truth is found in the personhood of the Christ, not in the propositional thought of the philosophers, and that true freedom arises from relationship, indeed befriending discipleship, rather than correct epistemology. The mystico-religious seems to present itself as a foil to the philosophic. The spiritual stance, however, does not depreciate the importance of knowing; it already presupposes that object of 'the best' (ancient) philosophy was the spiritually real (it is too drab just to say metaphysical when so much more was entailed). There is, after all, a special convergence. The purpose of the Evangelist, however, and indeed of other mystico-religious minds engaged with philosophy, was to take the latter quite beyond its intellectual limitations, in John's case to show that knowledge disengaged from the Word or living Wisdom who came to dwell among us (1:14; cf. Mt 7:35; Lk. 7:35) could not save anybody's soul. Philosophy had its place, but not as the substitute for the way of salvation.

With these two *exempla* before us, each being so determinative for the philosophy and theology that have been taught in Western educative institutions over millennia, what are we to make of the esoteric? It is the cultivator of hidden wisdom. It pretends to probe the 'really true.' Not that philosophers and spiritual teachers as we have already introduced them have neglected to extol wisdom. It is just that the bearers of 'an esoteric message' will not be convinced that the others have reached the deep heart of the matter, and they have the 'secret(s)' that should never be divulged publicly. The esoterist posits access to an

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

essence of knowing, or a *sapientia profunda*; and without participation in this arena of mysterious unveiling even salvation is questionable. Certainly only the spiritual elite can be assured of arrival at the great cosmic Door of Life, with the finely-cut key. In this claimed approach to the threshold of the divine or all-truth, the esoterist is comparable to a mystic; yet insofar as knowing 'secret depths' is its *sine qua non*, esoterism contrasts with most phenomena of mysticism for being ineradicably gnostic¹ or - if the intimations of heresy are disliked - theosophic. As I have shown elsewhere,² moreover, esotericizing minds characteristically imagine that true knowledge has been passed by isolated wise ones through the ages (in the West Noah, Zarathustra, Hermes (-Thoth), Orpheus and Pythagoras have been favourites), and, because the bearing of this knowledge is sparse, it can be lost and often requires re-unveiling to the select few. The acquisition of what is usually 'missed' makes the 'possession of the secret' something personally - and of course very individually - powerful, and all the more attractive.³

We are not to imagine that the domains of the philosophic, theological and even of the esoteric are impervious to the inroads of secularization in our time. They are all *traditional* pursuits and all share religious origins, but they have each fallen susceptible to secularizing impetuses in one way or another. Sometimes it hard to find religious interests in a contemporary university philosophy department; sometimes we find theologians trying to be 'too scientific' - in the conservative (less us say, anti-evolutionary) camp - or allowing that agnostics can just as viably do theology as believers - according to some liberal views. As for esoter(ic)ism, it can and has been sucked into secular trajectories of thought, because there are so many specialist areas of thought and activity that are grasped only by a few. We are, in the views of the eminent Eric Voegelin, in world of competing

¹ For background, W. Hanegraaff, *Het grote en het kleine werk*, Universiteit te Utrecht, Utrecht, 1990, pp. 115-20.

² G. W. Trompf, 'Macrohistory', in A. Faivre and W. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosticism and Western Esotericism*, Brill, Leiden, 2002, s.v.

³ See G. Simmel, *Secret et sociétés secrètes*, Éditions Circé, Strasbourg, 1991.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

gnoseologies,¹ and from universities to tiny academies there are plenty of publicly advertised institutions offering the chance for anyone to unlock the secrets of the universe, as if the power over the secret is now accessible to anyone.²

The point of this paper is to discuss some dynamics of transition between esoteric and the exoteric (and *vice versa*) in the history of religions. In this small compass I give special attention to religious shifts and the emergence of Christianity in the Mediterranean world of Antiquity; but I then go on to sketch out the implications of these ancient dynamics for subsequent developments - for hermeneutical tensions in mediaeval Islam, and for various ideo-spiritual struggles in the post-mediaeval Christian world.

Late Antique Mystery Religions, Early Christianity and Gnosticism.

The religious situation of the Romano-Hellenistic world just before the time of Jesus is notoriously complex, but it now virtually goes without saying that appeals to the mysterious and to esoteric levels of spiritual initiation were attractive elements of religiosity under the expanded Roman Empire. Once Egypt was fully absorbed, there was widespread fascination with its long-inured cultic life (cf., e.g., Plutarch, *De Isid. et Osirid.* 355D-373E), resulting most noticeably in an increasing spread of temples dedicated to Isis across the Roman world.³ It was not just that the specific cult of Isis held a special aura of undivulged secrets

-
- ¹ Eric Voegelin, esp. *Science, Politics and Gnosticism: Two Essays*, H. Regnery, Chicago, 1968. Cf., for other kinds of charges of a modern Gnosticism, e.g., in philosophy, F. Milanese, 'Fenominologica gnostica e religione e religione filosofica in Pietro Martinetti', *Religioni Società*, Vol. 7, No. 14, 1992, pp. 45-66; in psychotherapeutic circles, R.H.S. Smith, 'M. Scott Peck's Gnostic Superhighway,' *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 1992, pp. 179-87.
 - ² On the 'consumerization' of the esoteric, start with A. Possamai, 'Secrecy and Consumer Culture,' *Australian Religion Studies Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2002, pp. 44-56. On the issue of the secularization of the esoteric more generally, W. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Brill, Leiden, 1996.
 - ³ R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient [formerly: Graeco-Roman]World*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997 edn..

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

(cf. Lucius Apuleius, *Metamorph.*, xvii-xviii), the whole of the old Egyptian religion was enshrouded in mystery because the secrets of ancient hieroglyphics were barely divulged (cf. Horapollo, *Hieroglyphy.*), and because the Egyptian priests had traditionally preserved much of their ritual knowledge for members of the pharaonic court alone.¹ The set of notions that old Egyptian accesses to deep wells of wisdom, going back to Thoth, and celebrated in terms of Hermes Trismegistus, is also a late antique Hellenistic construction arising from the eventual impenetrability of hieroglyphs.² Old Egyptian writing was therefore already occult in late Antiquity (especially in such a melting-pot as Alexandria), and it was already emerging as a sign-system of magical formulae in a destabilized world increasingly obsessed by spells for personal defence and cosmic security.³ It is no wonder that the subject of such 'Mysteries' was one so intriguing as to generate scholarly investigation, and to stimulate hopes for a more objective study of different religions during the nineteenth century.⁴

1 E. Iversen, *The Myths of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* Gec Gad, Copenhagen, 1961, ch 2.

2 G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, cf. *Corp. Hermet. (in toto)*, also noting in the *Aeschlypius* part of it the the lament over old Egypt's decline in this connection (25-).

3 Cf., e.g., *Papyri Graeci Magicae: die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (ed. K. Preisendanz), Teubner, Leipzig, 1931 (incantations and concerns to effect magic in Greek papyri found in Egypt); cf. also E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986; A.K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs, 332BC—AD 642*, British Museum, London, 1986, pp. 188ff. (for relevant expositions).

4 Of special interest, Benjamin Constant, *De la religion, considérée dans sa source, ses formes et ses développements*, De Mat, Brussels, 1833, Vol. 4, Chs. 2-10 ; G. Anrich, *Das antike Mysterienwesen in seinem Einfluss auf das Christentum*, Huth, Göttingen 1894; and earlier work by Franz Cumont, e.g., *Les mystères de Mithra*, Lamertin, Brussels, 1900. For the significance of these authors as theorists, B. Fontana, 'Introduction,' to her edited B. Constant, *Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988; G. Casadio, 'Franz Cumont, historien des religions et citoyen du monde,' in *Imago Antiquitatis: Religions et iconographie du monde romaine: Mélanges offerts à Robert Turcan*, comps. N. Blanc and A. Buisson, De Boccard, Paris, 1999, pp. 61-5. Of course mystery cults were known much earlier than Late Antiquity. For an up-to-date bibliographic survey, Giovanni Casadio, 'Nota di aggiornamento bibliografico,' appendix to R. Pettazzoni, *I*

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

The whole Romano-Hellenistic period, of course, involving culturo-religious interconnections from Persia to Britain, and extending in time from *ca.* 300 BCE (the three Greek Kingdoms) to 400 CE (the early Christian empire) was rich in terms of 'mystery talk'. Thus, apart from Egypt, there are other so-called 'Oriental mysteries' to consider - evoking the wisdom of Chaldaea, Zarathustra, of the Jews, and so on - and even revitalizations of local Greek initiatory rites (as at Eleusis) or of Latin oracular (Sibylline) pronouncements.¹ Perhaps the most indicative and widespread of these Eastern 'cults' before the remarkable increase of the Christian following was Mithraism.² Popular among the Roman Empire's soldiery, and fostered by emperors from Commodus to Caracalla and beyond, this was an initiatic religion that paradoxically focussed on Mithras, a major deity of that great imperial foil to Rome - Persia. Mithraic cosmogeny turns Mithras into the equivalent of Plato's demiurge in the *Timaeus*, yet expressed more mythologically. The world is created when Mithras reluctantly slays the cosmic Bull on orders sent by a Raven messenger from the Sun. At this transformative death the white Bull becomes the Moon, Mithras' cloak the vault of heaven, and the holy seed and blood of the slain one fertilizes the earth to make life possible. The bull's death itself marks

Misteri: Saggio di una teoria storico-religiosa (pres. D. Sabbatucci), Lionello Giordano, Cosenza, 1997, pp. 243-5.

- ¹ Start with F. Cumont, *Les Religions orientales dans le paganisme Romain* [1906], E. Leroux, Paris, 1909, Chs. 2-3, 5-6; J. Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1974 (though not considering the Chaldaean Oracles; see below n. 85); V. Magnien, *Les mystères d'Éleusis: leurs origines, le rituel et leurs initiations*, Payot, Paris, 1938 edn., Ch. 1, Pt. 6 (though not considering Plutarch, *De profect. in virtut.*, 81D-E; Strabo, *Geog.* IX,i,12; and Pausanias, *Periëg.* VIII,xv,1-5, Tertullian, *De Bapt.* 5; Jerome, *Adv. Iov.* ii,14; cf. E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [1776-87], Dent, London, 1910 edn., Vol. 2, p. 9; Vol. 3, p. 175, on the secret Eleusinian rites continuing. See also Lucian of Samosata, *Alex. fals. divinat.* 38-43; H. Diels (ed.), *Orac. Sybill.* (using *Sybillinische Blätter*, ed. H. Diels, Georg Reimer, Berlin, 1890, pp. 111ff.); Lactantius, *De Div. Inst.* II,xii-xiii, xvii, etc.; cf. F.C. Grant (ed.), *Hellenistic Religions*, Liberal Arts Press, Indianapolis, 1965, Pt.3.
- ² For the best introduction, M.J. Vermaseren, 'Paganism's Death Struggle: Religions in Competition with Christianity', in *The Crucible of Christianity, Judaism, Hellenism and the Background to the Christian Faith*, A.J. Toynbee (ed.), World Publishing, New York, 1969, pp. 253-5; M. J. Vermaseren, *Mithras, the Secret God* (trans. T. and V. Megaw), Chatto & Windus, London, 1963.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

the onset of the struggle between good and evil, and the Creation issuing from it involves both the demarcation of the four elements and grossness of matter. In this cosmic frame, the souls of humans descend to earth, pass through the seven spheres of the planets, and fall caught in material bodies.¹

More to our point, the significations of this mythology and accompanying purificatory rituals are disclosed in stages by priests (*magi*), down in artificially lit yet fresco-decorated subterranean sanctuaries (called *mithraea*). The seven stages of initiation - of Raven, bridegroom, soldier, lion, Persian, courier of the Sun, and Father (with their respective masks or dress) - reveal the process by which the soul can escape bodily entrapment after death and pass through the seven planetary spheres (opening gates of metal pertaining to each of them) to reach its original home among the stars in Mithras' vault. At each stage of preparation, a ritual of challenge and revelation seems to have occurred. At the level of soldier or *miles*, for example, a sham duel or ordeal tests the initiate's courage.² But expectedly, the further (in the course of a lifetime) one manages to penetrate the revelatory layers, the more secret and impenetrable the Mysteries become.

Now, it has become a regular conceit in 'New Age esoteric' verbiage, that the renowned movement which was eventually going to overtake Mithraism, even among soldiers, was a mishmash of existing mysteries and Mithraic language of sacrifice and sacramentalism.³ I refer, of course, to ancient Christianity; which must, as usual, be studied with an ever-renewed care considering the mass of opinions posited about it. I will not, considering my stated views elsewhere,⁴ take up the argument, propounded as a 'new gnosis' by my former colleague Barbara Thiering, that the *New Testament* was deliberately

¹ For indications, esp. Porphyry, *De antro nymph.* 6-7; Mithras Liturgy (Papyr. Magiq., Bibliot. National., Paris, No. 574), ll. 475-834.

² The chief sources for the seven grades are Jerome, *Epist. ad Laetam*, CVII,2; Porphyry, *De Abstin.* iv,6; *Antro nymph.* 15; Celsus, *Verit. verb.*, apud Origen, *Contr. Cels.*, vi, 22 (on a final eighth grade), cf. Tertullian, *De Corona*, 15.

³ E.g., J. Chesterman *et al.*, *An Index of Possibilities: Energy and Power*, Clanose, and Wildwood House, London, 1974, p. 220c.

⁴ G. W. Trompf, 'The Long History of Dead Sea Scrolls Scholarship', *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2002, pp. 137-8.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

written as a secret code.¹ But I will accept consensus scholarship, that various filaments of pre-existing mystery discourse were evoked to make sense of the Galilean Jesus in a Hellenistic *milieu*. In the *Epistle to the Romans* 6:3-5, for instance, Paul possibly alludes to the *taurobolium* rite - when Mithraic initiates had bull's blood spilt over them in a pit - in his talk of being 'buried with Christ by baptism'.² Paul's appeal to Christ as *mysterion* in Colossians (2:2, cf. 1:26-7; 4:3) seems designed to meet an audience claiming a special gnosis (cf. 2:2-4), whether this derived from Greek or early Merkavah Jewish sources.³

It is the major thrust of the present argument, however, that the earliest Christian writers presented their emergent faith as an 'open mystery', and wilfully chose public proclamation and demonstration in contrast to the cultivation of secrecy and initiatory disclosures. If we take the formation processes of the *New Testament* as a set of clues, we cannot deduce from the evidence that a body of esoteric texts was in the making. Some responses to the new teachings were to turn them into a '[special] gnosis' (1 Tim. 6:20b); and it is undoubted that most early Christian texts were shared around 'in-house', so that, in a world in which writings were copied and in limited circulation, it would appear to outsiders, especially in times of official distrust of Jews and/or Christians, that the new movement propagated dark secrets or mysterious notions.⁴ One renowned *New Testament* text, the 'Book of Revelation', was also written in the vogue of the underground

¹ B. Thiering, esp. *Jesus the Man*, Doubleday, New York, 1992, pp. 28ff.

² Yet cf. a recent commentator F. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. H. Knight), Lutterworth, London, 1961, pp. 151-70. See also Titus 3:5; Rev. 7:14, cf. 1:5b. If, in the latter case, the AV favours less creditable MSS reading 'wash' (*louō*) rather than 'free' (*luō*) 'in his [or Christ's] blood', which would recall the Mithraic claim that Mithras 'has redeemed us by the shedding of the eternal blood' (of the cosmic bull), the conceit of being 'washed ... in the blood of the Lamb' nonetheless remains in Rev. 7:14.

³ F.G. Martínez (ed. and trans.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, Brill, Leiden, 1994, pp. 419-31; cf. C. Newsom (ed. and comm.), *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice: A Critical Edition*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1985. Cf. also A. Böhlig, *Mysterion und Wahrheit*, Brill, Leiden, 1968, on mystery themes in later Judaism (for which certain Biblical passages (eg., Jer. 33:3), were relevant.

⁴ Consider not only Pliny min., *Epist.* X.xcvi (ca. 110 CE); but opinions of the character Triephton in Lucian, *Philopat.* (ca. 145); Celsus, apud Origen, *Contr. Cels.*, i,6 (240s).

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

resistance literature we call apocalyptic, with all its attendant undeciphered symbolism.¹

On the other hand, a characteristic of Gospel texts was that they were proclamatory, and thus 'open' rather than meant to deliver covert messages. Even if most such texts did not therefore mimic the 'biographies' of the time, moreover, at least one, with its additional volume on the beginnings of the Christian movement, was apparently intended for the public market (cf. the dedicatory procedures of Lk. 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5).² Other pieces of evidence count against a deliberate esotericizing *mentalité* - such as the rapid production and circulation of all sorts of documents that are reflected behind the remarkable 'grassroots and populist-looking phenomenon' of the *New Testament*;³ the practice of appending what emerged as *New Testament* collections to the already widely circulated *Septuagint* (or Greek *Old Testament*); and an accessibility such Christian critics as doctor Celsus had to Christian texts.⁴ The Christian *Apocalypse*, we should also hasten to add, was the last book to gain acceptance into the *New Testament* canon (just as *Daniel* was last into the Jewish *Tanakh*), because disclosing more than veiling was the predominant temper of 'foundation Christianity'.⁵

-
- 1 A.R. Collins, 'Persecution and Vengeance in the Book of Revelation', in D. Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, J.C. Mohr, Tübingen, 1989, pp. 729-49.
 - 2 For background, G. W. Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography: Narratives of Retributive Justice*, Continuum, London, 2000, Chs. 1-2 (considering *en route* Lives by Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, etc.); cf. C.H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels*, ISPCK, London, 1978; *idem*, *Luke and the Gnostics: An Examination of Lucan Purpose*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1966 (Luke as consequently anti-gnostic); M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. H. Greeven, trans. M. Ling), SCM, London, 1956 edn., pp. 123 ff.
 - 3 See esp. C.F.D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, A.R. Allenson, Naperville, 1967; cf., for special examples, W.L. Knox, *The Sources of the Synoptic Gospels* (ed. H. Chadwick), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 1953-7; E.M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors*, SCM, London, 1961 edn.
 - 4 For these two developments, e.g., *Codex Sinait.* (British Museum) and the copying tradition behind it; Celsus, *Verit. Verb.* apud Origen, *Contr. Cels.* e.g., i,61-2; ii,9, 31-2, 43, 55, etc. (178-80 CE).
 - 5 Start with R.D. Wilson, 'The Book of Daniel and the Canon', *Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. 13, 1915, pp. 352ff.; S.B. Frost, *Interp. Dict. Bib.*, Vol. 1, s.v.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

In terms of stated views, nothing better confirms the early appeal to an 'open mystery' than the Pauline epistolary materials, or more particularly, the Deutero-Pauline editor(s) of the Pauline corpus of letters (ca. 90 CE). One has to appreciate that Paul wrote many more letters than are extant (cf. the apocryphal 3 Cor., Laod.), and that most were in any case less likely to be copied and circulated for being very context-specific, or perhaps too polemical, in content. It has been suspected, moreover, that there was an early period of unpopularity toward his labours, not just because he could be 'misunderstood' and thus 'twisted' (2 Pet. 3 15-16), but because he was actually very socially radical - even regarding women! - than his later editors made him to be.¹ In the forming of the New Testament, in any case, the selecting and transmission of Paul's letters as a *corpus* eventually occurred, whether because he was 're-discovered' or accepted all along as the great missionary the *Book of Acts* portrays him to be. And the first arrangement and editing of these letters probably preceded the settling of any fourfold Gospel canon.²

There is a fascinating and persuasive theory, put by the scholar Leslie Mitton, an eminent Methodist liberal, that the original order of the chosen *Pauline epistles* had the *Letter to the Ephesians* first, rather than the present situation, which has the longest - *Romans* - first and the shortest - *Philemon* - last (as a crucial precedent for the *Qur'an!*)³ Why Mitton singled out *Ephesians* in this way has to do with the major argument of this article: as the most famous commentator of this epistle, he was struck by its comparative expansiveness of theological vision, indeed its almost total lack of historical context. Admittedly,

¹ See esp. S.G.F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*, SPCK, London, 1968, esp. ch. 11; G. W. Trompf, 'On Attitudes towards Women in Paul and Paulinists on Women: 1 Cor. 11:3-16 and its Context', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 42, 1980, pp. 196-215.

² Esp. R.M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament*, Hutchinson, London, 1965, Chs. 1, 5-8.

³ C.L. Mitton, *The Formation of the Pauline Corpus of Letters*, Epworth, London, 1955, esp. Ch. 7. At present *Ephesians* comes fifth in order. One can get a sense of the arbitrariness of the ordering when discovering that the *Letter to Philemon* is very closely related to *Colossians* (see Col. 4:17; Philem. 2) and was probably sent with it, see J. Knox, *Philemon among the Letters of Paul*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1935, who also deduces *Ephesians* to be originally first in the ordering.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

writing from prison is indicated - by a vague allusion (3:3) and a concluding remark that Paul is 'sending' Tychicus (6:4, information paralleling what we find in *Colossians* 4:7, cf. 10 where incarceration is also mentioned).¹ But the edifying and Mishnaic-looking 'writing around' of small (fragments of) Paul's letters by deutero-Pauline hands is known elsewhere, if we are to take seriously the consensus view of the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Tim.; Tit.) as secondary.² Indeed, the distinctive literary style of *Ephesians*, assessed together with the above-mentioned considerations, led Mitton to the conclusion that the epistle was deutero-Pauline in authorship, and that its very composer put the original selection of Paul's letters together, arranged and edited them (presumably with subtractions and additions), and prefaced them all with a grand epistle, presented in a putatively 'Pauline' style and as a great evocation of spiritual freedom and grace in the spirit of Paul's soteriology.³

Significantly, what marks the theology of *Ephesians* is the language of *mysterion*. Not that this concept is absent from other epistles; in fact *Colossians*' reference to 'the knowledge (*epignôsis*) of God's *mysterion* of Christ' (2:2, cf. supra), as a foil to gnostizing tendencies, look to be inspiration for the stress in the more theologically 'programmatically' letter (cf. also Rom. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:7, etc.). What is characteristic of *Ephesians*, however, is the stress on the open disclosure of the Mystery of the divine will in the work of Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel (esp. 1:9; 6:19), and the unprecedented 'self-reflective' claims of Paul as to his revelations and insights into this mystery (3:3-4) and concerning his ministry to 'make all humans see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages' (9). The memorable emphasis of the letter is on the opening up of the divine salvation for all: the making of peace and the breaking down of the 'dividing wall of hostility' between God

¹ See J.L. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, pp. 15ff.

² E.g., most recently, E.E. Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents*, Brill, Leiden, 1999, Pt. 2, and append. iv. Earlier contesting this approach, however: J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus*, Harper & Row, New York, 1963.

³ C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: Its Authorship, Origin and Purpose*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1951, *passim*. Of course, the freer hand of an amanuensis acting under Paul's own direction cannot be ruled out.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

and humanity because the message of the new covenant is reaching out to all peoples (esp. 2:11-22). This thrust is followed up by a broad pastoral encouragement for the Church (it would seem as a whole), and its struggle against the 'principalities and powers' of evil (4:1-6:20),¹ a struggle which is ongoing rather than intensely eschatological as in Paul's better attested letters (see e.g., 4:3-14, yet cf. esp. 1 Thess. 4:16). In all, the appeal to *mysterion* is only to render it patently exoteric - to declare that hidden secret of time can now be shouted on housetops.

The *Letter to the Ephesians*, we should note, is the epistle of faith *par excellence*. 'By grace you are saved through faith, ... is the gift of God' (2:8, cf. 3:12, 17). And any reference to knowledge is strictly subordinated to belief/faith and love (3:14, 19). Now, this is precisely the stress against which ancient Christian Gnosticism evidently reacted. The agenda of the well-known Gnostics, we would argue, to reinvest the new movement with an aura of hidden truth that seemed more appropriate to the Hellenistic *milieu* of mystery cults or competing ancient 'mysticisms'. The key elements of any great Mystery were vows of secrecy taken by initiands, that the initiates would acquire the 'esoteric equipment' by which to ward off all evil (demons, fate, and so on), and that they would have disclosed to them through ritual, teaching and experience the previously 'unknown' Divinity.² Exponents of ancient Christian Gnosticism attempt to conduct the religious response to the newly burgeoning Jesus movement precisely in these directions.

The episcopal apologist Irenaeus of Lyons made his most general point of criticism against the followers of Basilides (in the 180s CE), for example, that the initiate 'is wholly forbidden to reveal their mysteries; rather one must keep them secret in silence', and thus not take responsibility for openly proclaiming the Gospel (including a possibility of suffering the consequences) (*Adv. Haer.* I,xxiv,6). It is an interesting feature of anti-heretical polemic by the early Roman ecclesiastic Hippolytus (210s), again against Gnostic teachings, that he had to address the background influence of the Pythagoreans, who

¹ G. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study of Pauline Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956.

² Of value here, G. Anrich, *Mysterienwesen*, *op. cit.*, pp. 31ff.; S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*, John Murray, London, 1925, pp. 52 (quotation), p. 79.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

divided their pupils into the 'esoteric' and 'exoteric', with only an inner core 'confided more advanced teachings' and the rest 'a moderate amount of instruction' (*Adv. Haer.* I,2).¹ Here we seem to have the first extant 'critical assessment' of this dichotomy, with an anxiety over the spiritual (as against social) inequality it betokened. Thus Hippolytus can later go on to question such an approach to the Christian faith as that of Marcus, the Valentinian-looking Gnostic master, who instructed his adherents to keep his disclosures secret, whispered inaudible utterances at their baptisms, and reserved the higher mysteries only to an elite group (VI,36).²

In this light, one needs to look again at some of the recovered texts of the ancient Gnostics to apprehend afresh accentuations of secrecy. 'These are the secret words (*êshade ethêp*) which the Living Jesus spoke ... whoever finds the explanation (*hermêneia*) of these words will not taste death': so runs the opening gambit of the (Coptic) *Gospel of Thomas* (II,xxxii [80]:10-14), apparently indicating that the list of Jesus's sayings that followed were for those given *entrée* to an inner circle.³ Other Nag Hammadi documents already point to an occult readership and meaning in their very headings. Look, for a start, at the Apocrypha (lit. [the] 'hidden things' [that are] 'hard to understand') of James and John. Again, consider the Gnostic Apocalypses (lit. 'uncoverings of secret things') of Adam, Peter, Paul, and James (two of them): these are hardly eschatologically-charged and cosmo-historically-focussed apocalyptic works most would expect them to be,

-
- ¹ For some background, J.Z. Smith, 'No News is Good News: The Gospel as Enigma [and Secrecy in Late Antiquity]', in K. W. Bolle (ed.), *Secrecy in Religions* (Suppl. to *Numen*, 49), Brill, Leiden, 1987, pp. 71-7.
 - ² For an *entrée* into Basilidean and Valentinian systems of Gnostic thought and relevant texts, e.g., B. Layton (trans. and introd.), *The Gnostic Scriptures*, Doubleday, New York, 1987, pp. 217ff., 417ff. The usages of esoteric in Hellenistic Greek presumably arose from the *exôtikos/esôtikos* dichotomy in classical parlance, e.g., Liddell, Scott and Jones, *Grk.-Eng. Lexic., Supp.*, pp. 57a, 63b, allowing me to reinforce an earlier argument of mine that the origins of social scientific criticism lie in the Christian Patristic handling of 'divergent' movements, G. W. Trompf, 'Missiology, Methodology and the Study of New Religious Movements', *Religious Traditions*, Vol. 10, 1987, esp. pp. 96-8.
 - ³ For the editing through which this Gospel passed, S.L. Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom*, Seabury, New York, 1983.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

but are 'revealed' esoteric and eternal truths.¹ All this speaks of a shared 'project' to turn Jesus into a Man of Mystery, and to render him 'esoteric,' at least in the first instance as a purveyor of 'secrets sayings' and the subject of 'secret Gospels'.²

It is curious how the secrecy motif has been downplayed by more recent commentators, perhaps through an unconscious effort to recover ancient Gnosticisms as expressions of de-institutionalized Christianity highly relevant to our own times.³ But attention to the motif now threatens to return, particularly through the work of the Italian Giovanni Casadio,⁴ and not before due time. Even in new methodological studies, we should note, the secrecy aspect of esoter[ic]ism has been glossed over. When the eminent Antoine Faivre presented his ideational *tableau* of Western esoteric preoccupations - with the correspondences of things; living nature; imagination and mediations; experience of transmutation; praxis of concordance; transmission - he made virtually nothing of 'the secretive'.⁵ It is no wonder that he and other critical commentators of Western esotericism would react adversely against such a novel as *Foucault's Pendulum* by Umberto Eco, which associates what Faivre would take as a longstanding spiritual tradition with hideous rituals locked away in the recesses of Western criminality.⁶ On the other hand, it would surely be absurd to rule out 'religious activity' from being esoteric that does not fit neatly into Faivre's *air de famille* but which is conducted in secret and in pursuit of

¹ Translations of these books are conveniently located in J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Brill, Leiden, 1977.

² For background, e.g., R.M. Grant, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus according to the Gospel of Thomas*, Collins, London, 1960; M. Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1974.

³ See, e.g., H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Beacon, Boston, 1963 edn.; G. Widengren, *The Gnostic Attitude*, trans. and ed. B.A. Pearson, University of California Press, Santa Barbara, 1973; E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1979.

⁴ G. Casadio, *Vie gnostiche all'immortalità*, Morcelliana, Brescia, 1997, esp. Ch. 1.

⁵ A. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, SUNY, Albany, 1994, pp. 10-15.

⁶ On Eco's book, see the article by C. Cusack in this volume. Cf. A. Faivre and J. Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, Crossroads, New York, 1992. See also G. Quispel, *Gnosis - De derde component van de Europese cultuurtraditie*, Hes, Utrecht, 1988.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

hidden truth, for secrecy and the esoteric go hand-in-hand far too often for their wedding to be neglected.¹

Secrecy as such, of course, was basically an indication in much ancient Gnosticism that a teacher's approach was highly initiatic (in a close-knit, small group) and that a cultic divulgence of hitherto undisclosed truth, or *gnôsis*, was not for public consumption or to be carried as an 'open Gospel.' The function of a prevalent gnostic *mythos* becomes explicable here: the spiritual elite are in possession of a knowledge others have neither yet intuited or learnt. To use Valentinian language as a useful index, these *pneumatikoi* are assured that their true Home is an unknown God (not the creator god of *Genesis*); that the material world reflects a cosmic marring, as the aeons (or heavenly 'powers and principalities') multiply in a emanative descent further and further from the universe's true Home; that the 'spirituals' have such sparks of the divine in them as to be able to return to their Source; that the cosmic Christ is sent down from the hidden God to convey wisdom from its previously undisclosed Fount; and that the elite will return Home at death through being able to name and pass through the aeonic powers that make up the emanated 'fulness of things' (*plêrôma*).² Such Gnosis is the Secret which, for those holding 'these other opinions' (*haereses*) in characteristically 'small circles', was not being made known in the mainstream church, indeed for the Gnostics 'ordinary mere believers' were foolishly denying it. Such occult group revelation of this Secret delivered Christianity in the 'package' of a Mystery religion, more in keeping with Hellenistic expectations. What the Neoplatonist Porphyry (280s) thought as the essence of Mithraism could apply as easily to this Gnostic frame: that 'the *mystes* [mystery teacher or priest] initiated members by teaching the downward way of souls and their path back' (*Antro nymph. 6*).³

¹ Isaac Newton's work is a vital case in point, see below.

² For a basic introduction to Valentinianism, see G. Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. A. Alcock, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 4, *et passim*. For educational purposes, other Gnostic schools' positions are best comprehended by starting with this one, for which we have a great deal of information.

³ The subterranean or cavernous Mithraea, we note, symbolized the lowest descent of souls into the material world. As a Neoplatonist, Porphyry would obviously be interested in this motif because it accords with the cosmology and ideas about the

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

In the contest of interpretations, it was inevitable that there would be 'mainline Christian' reactions and special accommodations to this esotericizing tendency. Already, as suggested earlier, New Testament authors seem to address this general pressure in its earlier stages: Paul, for one, encourages thought of the cosmic Christ as the *plêrôma* or 'fulness of all things' instead of aeonic powers (Col. 1:19, cf. 2:9), while it was hardly without good reason that Rudolf Bultmann dubbed John's Gospel as distinctly 'gnostic' in tenor.¹ In fact, one might say these texts produced a trajectory of Christian Gnostic texts that cannot be said to lie outside orthodoxy, while at the same time fuelled fire for Gnostic heterodoxies. The Nag Hammadi Library, one should appreciate, consists of a *mixture* of 'classically heretical' materials and books that we can only loosely term 'Christian Gnostic' (which, incidentally, might have been inspirational for such early Egyptian monastics as the Pachomians).²

It now beholds us to ask, though, what were the various reactions to Gnosticisms *qua* combined 'esotericizing force' once they were in full swing during the second and third centuries CE? More particularly, was there a stress to affirm in countervalance that the Christian way was distinctly, even exclusively, *exoteric*? The answer is not simple, theologically or socially. It is not simple theologically, because we can hardly say Christian reflectors wanted to wear the accusation of 'externality' that Gnostics were wont to lift against them. For all his pinpointing of errors in Basilidean, Valentinian and Marcionite teachings, for example, we would be unwise to deduce that bishop

soul in the work of his master Plotinus (cf. *Ennead*. IV,9-12, 31; VII, 8ff. on the 'circuit' of the soul).

- ¹ See C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1957; R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray), Westminster, Philadelphia, 1971, cf. also M. Franzmann and M. Latke, 'Gnostic Jesuses and the Gnostic Jesus of John', in H. Preißler and H. Seiwert (eds.), *Gnosisforschung und Religionsgeschichte*, Diagonal, Marburg, 1994, pp. 145-54. See also above.
- ² *Ibid.* The Pachomius connection has been raised because of the proximity between the Nag Hammadi finds and the mother Pachomian monastic house. See Robinson, 'The Discovery of Nag Hammadi Codices', *Biblical Archeologist*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 1979, pp. 201, 203, 210. We can immediately detect that monastic separateness holds a structural similarity to Gnostic small circles.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

Irenaeus was uninterested in the inward spiritual (and in that sense esoteric) life.¹ One renowned move in face of the gnosticizing trajectory, moreover, was hold up the ideal of a Christian who was a 'true Gnostic', that is, on the one hand, free from all perturbations of the soul as a godly person, yet on the other the very epitome of the best academic, 'erudite', and 'availing oneself of all human knowledge'. That was the tack taken by Clement of Alexandria, founder of the Christian Academy in Alexandria and teacher of the great Origen.² If admittedly he spent time 'deconstructing' the pagan mysteries as 'unholy and outrageous', in turn he recognized how wise it was that mysteries of the Christian faith should not be divulged to all, and that 'for the most part' its rites (or 'mysteries') were performed at night (*Stromat.* I,12; IV,4).³ But an Irenaeus or a Clement were never going to let go of a basic insight: that the Christian way was a faith, not a gnosis. 'Faith', as Clement long ago put for a subsequent millennium and three-quarters of critical thought, is 'the foundation of all knowledge' (II,4, cf. also 1 Cor. 1:25-6). We are of course not wrong in deducing that 'esoteric insight' was the classical Gnostic key to all truth; and in stressing this aspect Gnosticism presented as a 'theosophy', or spiritualising philosophy. How crucial Clement's alternative understanding was I can hardly begin to explain here; but of course it is a crucial point by which Christianity may distinguish itself from Vedanta, Buddhism, Islam, philosophy in general, let alone what Voegelin isolates as the contemporary gnostic attitude. After millennia of both philosophy and theology, moreover, we are in a better position to see how knowledge can never be argued out from within its own circles, and if any of its own holders claim privilege to received truth (including received inner truth), we would rightly respond that they begin from a position of faith without realizing it. Besides, in a post-modern context (so-called), we had better start believing that the central

¹ Thus, showing otherwise, E. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, Ch. 10.

² Clement, *Stromat.* II,19; VI,9; VII,11. See also E. Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1957, Chs. 11-12.

³ See M.W. Meyer (ed.), *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 1987, Ch. 8, esp. p. 243 (first quotation).

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

problem of all human thought, let alone philosophy, is credibility.¹ Common faiths weakened only produce endless, competing gnoses; and *eo ipso* explain a manic (re-) grasping for common faiths, or better, the heightened needs for intellectuals to work on their importance for social life!

To return to Antiquity, though, we find that, socially, the ‘majority and orthodox answer’ to Gnosticisms was likewise mixed. For, at the very time the Gnostic cells were very popular, the more ecclesiastically structured Christians were falling into trouble with the Roman imperial authorities with greater frequency. Clement's comment about the wisdom of nocturnal ceremonies provides a relevant hint here, although we find a typical mainstream ‘grouch’ about the Gnostics that they kept themselves right out of harm's way, eschewing any thoughts of martyrdom along with their meetings in secrecy.² Thus, as persecution increased, the more the orthodox spoke of what was carried out liturgically in places of security - including Rome's catacombs - as ‘the mysteries.’³ The sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, then, which accrued figurative, allegorical and mystical connections with Old Testament antetypes (the Flood, the near sacrifice of Isaac, etc.) over years of homiletics, became the Christian mysteries *par excellence*. The preserve of performing them had fallen steadily into the hands of a recognized ministry and/or priesthood (*sacerdotes*).⁴ By the days of Theodosius I the Great and ‘the establishment of Christianity’ in the 380s, with imperial measures that coupled severe restrictions on paganism with a radically enhanced security for the new faith,

¹ I foreshadow a work with Professor Cristiano Camporesi, University of Florence, on the problem of credibility.

² For a better known critique along these lines, Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccles.* II,xiv,2; VIII,i,6-3.1; X,iv,57, cf. III,xxvi,4; xxvii,1; IV,vii,1-2, 10; xiv,1; VI,xliii,4; vii,31; *Vit. Const.* iii,12, etc. Other points of contention come into this: on Clement versus the Basilideans, arguing for the goodness of God in spite of the martyrdoms, see H. Langerbeck, *Aufsätze zur Gnosis*, ed. H. Dörries, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1967, pp. 46-7.

³ For usages, G.H. Lampe, *Patrist. Grk. Lexic.*, cols. 891a-893b. On the period for Christian usages of catacombs, esp. J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1978, Chs. 6-7.

⁴ In Cyprian of Carthage, *Epist.* 61 (ca. 253 CE) we first learn of priests sharing with bishops the offices of taking the Eucharist and absolving sins.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, could readily 'take leaves out of the books' of the declining mystery cults of Mithras and the Great Mother, with his impressive exposition of the heart of the Christian *cultus* - in *De mysteriis*.¹ After the space of two and half centuries of danger, the Christian term *mysterion* shed underground associations and became the 'public Mystery' that it has largely been to this day. Various remaining Gnostic groups might continue to seize the advantage of hidden, elitist and nocturnal activities, but they were liable to be seen as subversive the more large congregational ceremonies and church-building were encouraged.²

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the exoteric/esoteric contest between orthodox and Gnostic during the central Patristic period has to do with debates over correct texts, not just beliefs. It is well known that the theology of a para-Gnostic separatist, that of Marcion of Sinope (d. ca. 160 CE), precipitated the need for a New Testament Canon ('measurement') of books to counter his position. For Marcion accepted as Scripture for his supporters only ten of Paul's epistles (ordered together with his own Prologues) and only one Gospel (that of Luke).³ During the straitened days of public suspicion against Christians, of course, contention and counter-contention about the correct choice of works and acceptable texts was in-house, and today all the moves are hard to trace.⁴ As opportunities better presented themselves, however, public rounds of debating between the orthodox and Gnostic were to be held. Two interesting cases in point belong to the earlier Diocletianic period (285-302), a time of imperial reform when the Church enjoyed

¹ Consult the Sources Chrétiennes edn. of *De mysteriis*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1961. Note also Ambrose, *De sacramentis*. Cf. also N.Q. King, *The Emperor Theodosius and the Establishment of Christianity*, SCM, London, 1969.

² E.g., on Manichaeism, esp. S. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Roman Empire and Medieval China: A Historical Survey*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985; and Priscillianism, H. Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila: The Occult and the Charismatic in the Early Church*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976.

³ For the best introduction, A. Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott, etc.*, J.C. Hinrichs, Leipzig, 1921.

⁴ Of signal importance was the mid-eighteenth century publication of the so-called Muratorian Canon (Ambrosiana MS [J 101 up]), the oldest one extant. For the history of the New Testament Canon, scholars stand in the shadow of T. von Zahn's *Geschichte des neutestamentliche Kanons*, A. Deichert, Erlangen, 1888-92, 2 vols.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

respite and when church-building went on apace - before the Great Persecution under Diocletian and his successors between 303 and 312.¹ In terms of actual documentation, we find the circulation in the 280s of a debate between the orthodox Archelaus and the aging Mani, held in Mesopotamia (ca. 277-8 CE) and admittedly therefore outside the Roman Empire.² Of even greater fascination is a published debate appearing ca. 290-300, attributed to one 'Adamantius' under the title *Dialogue on the True Faith in God (De recta in Deum fide)*, the English translation and commentary for which I have had the good fortune to edit for publication.³

The *Adamantius* debate is Late Antiquity's best *exemplum* of the dialogue genre (after the tradition of Plato's *Dialogues*), and yet its protagonists consist of five 'Gnosticizers' (two Valentinians, two Marcionites, and one follower of the well-known Syrian speculator Bardesanes) who contend one after another with the orthodox 'champion' Adamantius, under the supervision of a pagan adjudicator (who at the end, mind you, converts to the Adamantine position). The dialogue, however, only retains its fascination if one knows one's Bible as a public document, because, although cosmological and theological

-
- 1 For background, W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1985 edn, Ch. 13.
 - 2 Archelaus, *Disput.* The account of the debate gives a lively picture of Mani with a star-studded robe, upturned shoes, and so on, that tempt a projection of him as founder of the New Age! For the dating, S.D.F. Salmond, 'Introductory Note' to Archelaus, 'The Acts of the Disputation with the Heresiarch Manes', in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1978 edn, Vol. 6, pp. 176-7.
 - 3 Trans. and Comm. R.A. Pretty; ed. G. W. Trompf (*Gnostica*, Vol. 1), Peeters, Louvain, 1997. Unlike the case with Mani, though, we cannot be assured that at least something like the Adamantius debate actually occurred and that it was more than a mere literary device. For a critical edition of the Greek text and its translation at the hands of Rufinus of Aquileia, see W.H. van de Sande Bakhuyzen (ed.), *Der Dialog des Adamantius*, Hinrichs, Leipzig, 1901, though a critical text of the Latin has been better done by V. Buchheit, *Tyranni Rufini Adamantii Origenis Adversus haereticos interpretatio*, Wilhelm Fink, Munich, 1966. Rufinus [wrongly] takes 'Adamantius' to be Origen, considering this epithet was applied to the latter according to Eusebius, *Hist. eccles.* VI,xiv,10, a work Rufinus also translated into Latin. See Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography*, *op. cit.*, Ch. 4. Intriguingly, Adamantius was the name of Mani's chief disciple in the Roman empire, but this datum has no relevance here.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

ideas are presented in competition, most of the debaters appeal to passages of Scripture to 'prove' their viewpoints. And it is remarkable how frequently the orthodox Adamantius requotes the Biblical, especially *New Testament*, text to prove that his opponents' sources of authority lie in some defective versions (e.g., *Dial.*, 807a; 832b; 856d-858d; 869c, etc.),¹ and this quite apart from quoting it to combat interpretations that have been misunderstood or taken out of context (e.g., 817e; 818e-819a; 868c; 870e; 842d-843a; 850d, etc.). Thus at last, even before the freedom to come with the new Constantinian order, Biblical statements were presented as public texts for open debate. An exoteric medium was used to dissipate the effect of 'covertly preserved' errors of dissident groups. Already, moreover, credal formularies and concepts later to be used in the Nicene *symbolum* - including the contentious term *homoousios* - receive an airing in this crucial publicization of theological difference.² Thereafter, despite a retained discourse of mystery, theology became very much a matter of exoteric public debate, especially in the Eastern Roman empire, which was the contextual origin of the *Adamantius* dialogue and where lay participation in such theologizing was to remain remarkably high for centuries.³

The long-term Aftermath of the Ancient Exoteric/ Esoteric Dialectics (with Reference to hermeneutical Tensions in mediaeval Islam; and ideo-spiritual Struggles of the post-mediaeval Christian World).

To sketch the continuing esoteric/exoteric dynamic of classical Antiquity on various cultures and thought-systems bequeathing it involves an inevitable selectivity. Suffice it to say, however, that

¹ Or else the author of the Dialogue indirectly shows defections, by the peculiar nature of the Gnostics' quotations, e.g., 812d; 816e, etc. (even if some of Adamantius' quotations themselves do not always conform to the *textus receptus*!)

² *Dial.* 804b; 833e; 839e; 871d/I,2; II,21;III,3; V,28 (credal statements); 804b; 836f (*homoousios*). It is perhaps paradoxical, though, that this term *homoousios*, seems to have Hermetic and therefore 'esoteric' origins, see e.g., *Corp. Herm.* (Poimandres), I,10.

³ See S. Runciman, *The Eastern Schism*, Panther, London, 1970 edn., pp. 17ff.

processes comparable to those we have just examined can be detected in subsequent periods of history. Of special interest are reactivities between Sunni and Shi'a expressions of Islam; between late mediaeval Catholicism and early modern impulses of humanism and Protestantism; and between latter-day 'scientism' and the quest to recover a 'cosmic spirituality'. Space limits me to synoptic assessments; and it should be made clear here that there is no pretence to formulate any historical patterning in what follows. The ancient tendencies have simply put us on the look-out for later comparabilities.

Islam is the most impressive inheritor of the Gnostic trajectory. The early conquest of Egypt allowed direct access to Platonic and Neo-Platonic texts, which were utilized in a way that conformed to Islamic soteriology.¹ *In nuce*, Islam differs from Christianity in that its espousers teach salvation as 'the right way of knowing how to avoid unbelief and the ignorant (*jahili*) modes of life' rather than as 'the salvation from sin'. According to the *Qur'an*, we recall, Adam's lapse is not a complete Fall and, worshipped by the angels, he remains as (the first) prophet to whom 'unseen things' are revealed (*sur.* ii.27-37). And Jesus is not the Son of God that he can redeem, but rather a messenger that he can tell what should be made known (iii.43-4; xix.35). The message at one level is very basic, bearing certain affinities with pharisaic Judaism: 'whosoever believes in God, and does righteousness, God will acquit him of his evil deeds, and admit him into gardens...' (lxiv.8). But of course belief becomes in the community of Islam more than simple faith or feeling 'guidance in the heart', it involves acceptance of and obedience to the 'Manifest Message' (cf. Arab.: *al-balugh al-mubîn*) of the *Qur'an*, which shows 'God has knowledge of everything' (11-3, cf. i.181).²

In the foundation period of Islam, the exoteric predominates, and the straightforwardness of the religion's requirements are concomitant with the Arabs' spectacular takeover and garrison control of a vast

¹ For guidance, M. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy*, Bruno Cassirer, Oxford, 1962.

² A semantic point should be noted here that, as in the Hebrew Bible to know (*yathâ*) and to believe/trust (*amin*) are more integral than in the Greek *New Testament* (especially in the epistolary literature), the same applies in the Arabic of the *Qur'an* (e.g., iv.135; ix.119).

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

array of territories. *Qua* 'religion' (*al-dîn*) Islam appears in its most exoteric guise with propagated 'orthodoxies' concerning the *Qur'an*: from the time when the third Caliph 'Uthman's decided to propagate one uniform version of it (rather than the four then existing) (ca. 650 CE), on to when it is formally proclaimed (by the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mûn in 827) as the heavenly Word of God and coeternal with Him.¹ What marks the beginnings of the systematic intellectual development of an esoteric Islam is a reaction against this kind of politicized-looking orthodoxy as incompatible with the ultimate Unity of God.² The pivotal reactive movement defending this Unity (*tawhîd*) was that of the Mu'tazilah, who, refusing to admit Allah had separable parts, first taught the createdness of the *Qur'an* and even of the Divine Justice ('*adl*') as connecting the Divine to the human administration of law (*shari'a*).³

The kinds of esotericizing developments that follow from this point of altercation (first prominent in Basra and Baghdad during the ninth century) were expressed in forms of mystical hermeneutics; emanationism; imamology; occultative eschatology; and the hiddenness of sainthood. Basically, all forms of Shi'ite and sectarian Islam picked up key threads of Mu'tazilah methodology and ran with them into various forms of theosophy that became markers of group identification. A preliminary way of distinguishing the Shi'ite from the (conventionally orthodox) Sunni tradition is through recognizing the former's more mystical and esoteric (as against the latter's more formalist and 'legally-minded') reading of the holy book. Thus it is that various non-Sunnite schools will also re-read the *Qur'an* in terms of their distinctive theosophies.

A strong characteristic of such theosophies is the stress on the *tawhîd* to the point of an extreme negative theology, so denying Allah any human-associated properties that any principles mediating between

1 For background, F.M. Pareja et al., *Islamologie*, Imprimerie Catholique, Beirut, 1957-63, pp. 605, 700.

2 The singular Unity of God is of course already potently in the *Qur'an* itself, cf. e.g., v.77; xxviii.70; and see M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, Vol. 1, p. 367.

3 M.J.L. Young, 'Freethought in Medieval Islam', *The Dionysiad*, Vol. 2, 1960, pp. 4-15.

the divine and human - Word as the Book, Justice, Intelligence, Soul - are hypostatized as emanations. These mediating principles reflect the structure of the classic Gnostic *Weltanschauung* with its aeonic powers between the hidden God and the marred hylic order. Yet crucial differences are to be spotted: what is esoteric about God in Islam is not his cosmic removal but his radical Otherness that cannot be spoken in human terms (a motif shared in common between Islamic theosophy and apophatic theologies of Christianity, especially Eastern orthodoxy, and also Jewish mysticism).¹ And again, as in both mainstream Jewish and Christian imaging, the Creation of the physical cosmos, as an 'emanational outworking', amounts to a good rather than evil result. To put it more precisely for the comparative study of Gnosticisms, the descending divine order is towards a 'necessary materialization' as a reflection of the divine bounty, goodness and revelation, not towards a cosmic mistake (such as that effected through a self-deceived Sophia à la Valentinus or the Old Testament God-cum-Demiurge). What we may call *gnosis*, nonetheless, is the transmitted teachings about these emanations, often in protest, as with the Fatimid Isma'ili and Druze sectaries (founded tenth century), against a literalist reading of God's attributes.²

What we call imamology in the Shi'a tradition(s) is a related but more socially focussed phenomenon. Whereas in Sunni understanding the *imam* has an immediately pragmatic focus - the worthiest man in a community who can lead prayers and organize the local mosque affairs - the concept of imam in the Shi'ite tradition provides the springboard for a good deal of high speculation. In Shi'ite terms the Sunni mundane

¹ See esp. R. Mortley and D. Dockrill (eds.), 'The Via Negativa', in *Prudentia* (Suppl. vol.), 1988 (cf., next note infra): G. Scholem, *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken, New York, 1961.

² Start with H. Corbin, *Histoire de philosophie islamique*, Vol. 1: *Des origines jusqu'à la mort d'Averroës (1198)*, Gallimard, Paris 1964, pp. 118-24. For a in intriguing text: Mohammad ibn Sorkh via Abu'l-Haitham Jorjani, *Kasida* (ca. 1000 CE), in *Commentaire de la Qasida Ismaélienne* (eds. Corbin and M. Mo'in) (Bibliothèque Iranienne, 67), Institut Franco-Iranien, Tehran, 1955, esp. pp. 52-5. See also G. W. Trompf (with A. Kasamanie), 'The Druze and the Quaker: Reflections on the Social Implications of Mysticism', *Prudentia*, Suppl. Numb., 1981, pp. 188-94. On sectaries erupting at the time of al-Hakim, the Fatimid dynast of Egypt (996-1021), see P.K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, Macmillan, London, 1970 edn, p. 621 for assistance.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

approach was already indicative of a false terrestrial separation of religious (imamological) roles and the politicized Caliphate; and the acclaimed theologico-political starting-point of the Shi'a 'division' of Islam has always been with the symbol of continuing Muhammad's prophetic directorate: through 'Ali (bin al Hanafiya), adoptee and son-in-law of the Prophet himself. In Sunni terms 'Ali was but the fourth Caliph (whose reign ended when his followers were defeated in the battle of al-Kufa in 661 CE); but in Shi'ite reflection he was the first Imam, truly embodying the unity of spiritual and political leadership found in the Prophet himself, and beginning a chain of imams that are listed variously by different Shi'ite groupings.¹ From the first, his disappearance at al-Kufa inspires early seventh-century beliefs of his imamate as spiritualized - as a 'divine guide' and true head of Islam in a potent occultation - that affects subsequent, separate imamological lines of tradition.² One prominent common Shi'ite presumption is that 'Uthman's chosen version of the *Qur'an* deliberately expunged all references to 'Ali in it, so that the 'true,' hidden *Qur'an* is known only the imams and will only be fully revealed by the last one - al-Mahdi.³

It is the connection between imamology, occultation and eschatology that has been very specially developed in the Twelver, Ithna 'Ashariyah, or Imami Shi'ite tradition that has predominated in Iran or Islamized Persia. There all twelve imams have been conceived as past manifestations of the divine light now occluded; they are in the history of religions the very prototype of the hidden Masters who appear later in Western Theosophical thought. From 873 and 940, Muhammad ben Hasan al-'Askari, the last imam, who disappeared in the former year, was taken to communicate with human representatives in the community - the *wakils* - yet after this 'first and less occultation' no representative applied, and 'the greater occultation' will continue to

-
- 1 E.g., for a discussion of Ismai'ili imamological chains, as in the Gujarati, see G. W. Trompf, *Religion and Money: Some Aspects* (Junior Charles Strong Lecture), Charles Strong Trust, Adelaide, 1980, pp. 9-10.
 - 2 M.A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Islam: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (trans. D. Streight), SUNY, Albany, 1994, pp. 245-64.
 - 3 Pareja et al., *op. cit.*, p. 820.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

last until this Hidden Imam (al-Mahdi, the Director) will transform the world, both the external cosmos and the believer's internal being.¹

In terms of socio-religious dynamics, the rise of such outlooks and the accompanying movements amounted to a massive esoteric reaction to exoteric Islam. Of course at some basic level, if we take David Hume's historical 'rule of thumb,' the period of physical conquest had to pass and the peoples taken over eventually had to express, in high cultural and intellectual life as much as anywhere, their desire for peaceful existence.² But Shi'ite Islam has been a peculiar mix (or alternation) of aggressive political resistance and religious quietism over the centuries. And the dynamics of exoteric/esoteric interaction have often entailed reactions of one great Islamic bloc against the other - the Sunni forces seeking to contain the apparently irrational and uncontained mysticism of the Shi'a, and the latter demanding its freedom from legalism, literalism and a pragmatized political arena lacking cosmic significance. As the mediaeval centuries proceed, the dynamics of Sunni/Shi'ite reactivity is less easy to read as alternatory unless each region under Islam is taken separately. Sufism is also a complicated part of the story. Whichever great division of the Muslim religion was its birthplace, its emphasis on psychological insight and 'interior knowledge' (*ma' rifah*) already shows it to have greater affinities with Shi'ism. That may also have something to do with the covert persistence of pre-Islamic Persian spirituality, so that Sufi wayfarers' hostels (*khaneqah*) and secret initiations can compete with mosque institutionalization, and such Iranian poets as Hafiz and Omar Kaiyyam appeal to Zoroastrian conceits of wine, song and *eros* under the umbrella of an Islamic culture.³ Be the intricacies all as they

¹ See A.A. Sachedina, *Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1981; Amir-Moezzi, 'Eschatology III: In Imami Shi'ism' in E. Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Mazda, Costa Mesa, Ca., 1998, col. 8, pp. 576-7; cf. P.M. Holt, 'Islamic Millenarianism and the Fulfilment of Prophecy: A Case Study', in A. Williams (ed.), *Prophecy and Millenarianism*, Longman, London, 1980, Ch. 16.

² D. Hume, *Essays, Moral and Political* ix, in H.D. Aiken (ed.), *Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy*, Hafner, New York, 1948, p. 362.

³ See, e.g., M.E. Bastani-Parizi, 'Khaneqah, a Phenomenon in the Social History of Iran', in G. W. Trompf and M. Honari (eds.), *Mehregan in Sydney: Proceedings of the Seminar in Persian Studies, Sydney, Australia, 28 October-6 November 1994*,

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

may, Sufism could be accommodated into Sunni spirituality (by the early twelfth century, through the efforts of systematizer Abiū Hâmîd al-Ghazali [1058-1111]), and mystical philosopher Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240),- who espoused the Unity of all Being (and the necessary materialization of Creation).¹

What about relevant developments in the West? We must press on chronologically, although it is foolish to leave aside the reactivity between scholastic and mystical theologies, between Aristotelian and Platonic dialectics (both enriched through texts transmitted in Arabic), secular and monastic spiritualities, and between politically legitimizing and independent utopian social theory, in mediaeval Christendom. As background to what we have to say next, indeed, we can also affirm that the accentuation of the mystery of the Mass (as an event of transubstantiation) and the relative containment of theological learning in the West within the body of the clergy, made up filaments of a socio-cultural esoterism. This aura of mystery, however, eventually came to look like an egg cracked open. The world of the Church in the West came to be increasingly 'de-mystified,' if you like, through processes of laicization from the fourteenth century onwards, and with the rise of criticism against ecclesiastical shortcomings - in terms of clerical behaviour, the status and focus of traditional education, and the standing of received texts *vis-à-vis* a new critical awareness - during the next two centuries. It is possible, indeed, to re-envisage what transpired in the later Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation in terms of an ongoing, exoteric/ esoteric dialectic. This is not, we reiterate, to postulate any pattern theory of history, or to write as if such 'challenges and responses' we are plotting exhaust the history of ideas in these periods. We are simply in the business of noting interesting trends that

Sydney Studies in Religion 1, Sydney, 1998, pp. 71-8; A. Schimmel, 'Secrecy in Sufism,' in Bolle (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 81-102; cf. Masnavi of Hafiz, *Book of the Winebringer*, (versions by P. Smith), New Humanity Books, Melbourne, 1988; Omar Kayyām, *Rubaiyat* xi. See for a more restrained view, F. Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence* (trans. W. Stoddart), World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Ind., 1979.

¹ Cf. M. Lings, *What is Sufism?*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1975, pp. 110ff.; H. Kofler, 'Einführung' et alt. part., Ibn al-'Arabi, *Die Weisheit der Propheten*, Adeva, Graz, 1986, pp. xff.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

present themselves from textual materials, as we probe the topic we have chosen - yes, selected - to investigate.

As far as our comments on the early modern period is concerned, it is what we may deem the 'exposure' of the late mediaeval Church - as vulnerable to degeneration and to the loss of its right to sacred custodianship - that forms an explanatory backcloth to the rise of modern Western esoterisms. The 'high Renaissance' (ca. 1450-1520) is distinct for being experimental with other forms of 'mysteries' than those made familiar in the everyday activities of an as yet 'unrejuvenated' *ecclesia*. It would be an error to conclude, however, that resuscitating the iconic forms, symbols and literary inventions of the classical Graeco-Roman past was a collective exercise in neo-paganism. After all, an understanding of the complex late antique world of the Mystery Religions was still at a bare minimum. The project was, rather, an attempt by humanists and artists to reinvigorate the faltering effects of their own traditional Catholic religion with new, spiritually subtle *personae* - as if the born Venus of Botticelli's renowned painting could actually bespeak the purity of the Madonna and the virgin state.¹ When it comes to the philosophic (largely Neoplatonist) theologians of that time, moreover, they were as interested in shoring up the spiritual condition of the Church afresh as they were concerned to plumb as yet unconsidered depths.²

Here, because the possibilities for analytical coverage are so manifold, I will focus on a pivotal theme that is first systematically reflected upon in the high Renaissance and has persisted in Western esoterism thereafter. It is the defended claim that the earliest sources of truth derived from the Middle East, passing via Abraham and Zoroaster in Chaldaea to Egypt, whence, through the rôle of Hermes or Thoth, they were passed on to Orpheus and Pythagoras for the Greeks. Already in Islam, with Abraham projected as the historical progenitor of the true religion (Qur. xiv), there had been an aura cultivated around Haran (cf. Gen. 11.31-12:5) and the mysterious (Chaldaean) Sabaeans who had

¹ For general guidance, E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1969 edn.

² Start P.O. Kristeller, *The Classics and Renaissance Thought*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1955.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

somehow taped the sources of wisdom there (cf. Qur. xii.17, etc.).¹ Pythagoras, alleged founder of philosophy, alchemy, numerology and music, and author of *The Golden Words* (*Chrysia epê*), also came to be very much elevated in high mediaeval emanationist theologies, as in Ibn al-Sîd's *Book of [Cosmic] Circles* (1120s).² But the notion of such Middle Eastern wellsprings also came naturally to the Florentine priest Marsilio Ficino, the founder of the Platonic Academy. For, fascinatingly enough, the works of Plato he received for his famous translation (apparently brought from Greece by the Byzantine erudite Gemist[hi]us Plethon in 1438) had attached to them the *Chaldaean Oracles* (connected to Zoroaster) and the Hermetic treatise *Poimandres* (to Egypt).³ Ficino could feel at his fingertips, then, the textual footprints of an esoterically transmitted body of truth among the Gentiles that was concomitant with and confirming the Scriptures. And the adventurous Pico della Mirandola, who later collaborated with him (1484-94), added to this theory of pre-Platonic *successio* by announcing Moses' forgotten receipt of Kabbalistic wisdom at Sinai; a claim that prompted the German Christian humanist Johann Reuchlin, that self-inscribed Pythagoras *redivivus*, to speculate upon the *Kabbala* in the 1510s as if it were a Christian document in advance of the Incarnation.⁴ It only remained, it seems, for the Italian bishop Agostino Steuco to posit a *philosophia perennis*, a deep set of truths, in which all

-
- 1 D. Chwolsohn, *Die Ssabier und der Ssabismus*, Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, St Petersburg, 1856, 2 vols., esp. Vol. 2, pp. 366ff. on speculations in Arabic texts.
 - 2 Corbin, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-7, cf. E. Rosenthal, 'Fithaghûras', in B. Lewis et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition*, Brill, Leiden, 1965, Vol. 2, pp. 59-60.
 - 3 For details, with the nexus of the Oracles, Hermetica and Plato going back to Psellus, see O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Concepts of Man*, New York, 1972, Ch. 5. *The Chaldaean Oracles* (as ascribed to Julianus the Thergist) are conveniently trans. and ed. by R. Majercik, Brill, Leiden, 1989, and the *Poimandres* or 'Pymander' is only one component of the whole *Corpus Hermeticum*. On the place of Orpheus, G. Freden, *Orpheus and the Goddess of Nature*, Almqvist & Wiksell, Goteborg, 1958; and for Plethon, see G. W. Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979, Vol. 1, pp. 229-30.
 - 4 Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate* [1486] (using edn. of E. Garin, Florence, 1942); cf. also *Conclusiones*, in *Opera*, Basel, 1601, pp. 54-72; Reuchlin, *De arte cabalistica* (1517) (trans. M. and S. Goodman), Abacus, New York, 1983.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

philosophies, even religions, participated and from time to time penetrated,¹ a view coming to have longstanding implications for Western thought.

Both the Reformation and the later Renaissance were witness to continuing esoteric currents that one may fairly infer were reactions to the 'demystification' of the mediaeval Church and the heightened 'populist and exoteric impact' of foundation Protestantism. Apart from suggestive tensions within the Reformation process itself - aversions to reading the 'transaction' of the Eucharist as mere symbolism *à la* Zwingli, for instance, or attempts replace an abandoned monastic life in such (sectarian Protestant) communities we find with the Hutterites - we may continue to concentrate on attempts to reappropriate hidden or lost truth of the ages. A critical mass of later Renaissance speculations about such recoverability centre on the year 1600.

Here we have little choice but to adumbrate notable propositions at that time about an original revelation in which thinkers and cultures have repeatedly participated over the centuries, and utterances that distilled ethico-spiritual truth as if reinstating a pristine discernment long obscured. Most of the claims made, incidentally, were not as *avant-garde* as those of the highly itinerant Italian cosmologist Giordano Bruno, who went the stake for trying to resurrect what he took to be the primal *sapientia* of Hermes, the ancient Egyptian fount of a heliocentric world-picture and pre-Biblical truth.² Yet they all reflect a structurally similar quest. Thus, in his apparent conversion to Judaism (*ca.* 1570), French social theorist Jean Bodin took the Ten Commandments as the summary of all hidden truth or *arcana* (as well as the basis of divine retributive action by which all villainies were punished and commonwealths ruined). Bodin's probable associate in the Family of Love, radical Huguenot Philippe du Plessis-Marly Mornay, also announced his discovery in 1581 of 'the ancient and true religion' that reappears again and again in all 'the philosophers of all times' - a disclosure his Dutch translator took as confirming that Nature

¹ Esp. C.B. Schmitt, 'Perennial Philosophy: from Agostino Steuco to Leibniz', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XXVII, 1966, pp. 510-24. Its background inspiration lies in the work of another bishop, Nicholas of Cusa (in the 1450s).

² Esp. F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London, 1964, Chs. 1-10.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

itself was a Bible.¹ If this was to set in train the defence of 'Christianity as old as Creation' itself,² mystical and theological souls had as many divergent ways of proclaiming the retrieval of past enlightenment as they had different 'sectarian' backgrounds. We can see in them esoterist reactivity against the exoteric pamphleteering of the Reformation theologians.

Among theological 'radicals', Faustus Socinus' neo-Arian views were first aired in eastern Europe around 1600; he had decided against Christ's 'essential divinity' but interpreted Jesus' statement in the Gospel that 'no one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from it' (Jn. 3:13) as a reference to his own 'pre-Ascension ascension'. Jesus received *arcana* from heaven, and now it was being at last properly disclosed again in Socinianism.³ It was in the spring of 1600, moreover, when the mystical German shoemaker Jacob Boehme laid the basis for an enduring tradition of Christian esotericism, as a foil to an institutionalizing and literalizing Lutheranism. Boehme found himself bypassing the 'doctors' and 'the many masterpieces of writing' to disclose his great illumination, the 'noble pearl' and 'hidden

¹ Bodin, *Colloquium Heptaplomeres de Rerum Sublimium Arcana Abditis* ([1580s], posthum. 1841-57), trans. M.L.D. Huntz, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975, cf. C.R. Baxter, 'John Bodin's Daemon and his Conversion to Judaism', in *John Bodin: Verhandlungen der Internationalen Bodin Tagung in München*, ed. H. Denzer, pp. 8ff., Beck, Munich, 1973; Mornay, *De la verité de la religion Chrestienne*, Herman Mersman, Anvers, 1581, cf. R. Patry, *Philippe du Plessis-Mornay: un huguenot homme d'État*, Fischbacher, Paris, 1933; W. Kirsop, 'The Family of Love in France', *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1964, pp. 113-4. See also Mornay's *Verité* translated as *De Bybel der Nature: dat is vande Waerheydt, etc.*, H.C. Buck, Amsterdam, 1646.

² Alluding to the title of a book by Matthew Tindal (London, 1730), bringing to a highwater mark the previous century's neo-Platonic 'natural theology' (R. Cudworth, J. Toland, etc.). For the Patristic roots of such notions, e.g., Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*

³ *Explicationes variorum Sanctae Scripturae locorum* (ed. J. Moskorzowski) ([Rocovia]: S. Sternacius, 1618, pp. 146a-7a, cf. G.H. Williams, 'The Christological Issues between Francis Dávid and Faustus Socinus', in R. Dán and A. Pirnát (eds.), *Antitrinitarianism in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1979, pp. 318-9.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

mysteries of God's Wisdom' – 'Nature, the Mother', or *matrix* out of which all the diversity of speech and word had arisen.¹

A distinctive feature of Boehme's 'cosmo-historical' approach, we should pinpoint as significant, was the modified resuscitation of the 'Gnostic myth'. In terms already comparable to those we noted in Muslim reflection, this meant the descent of the divine process into the world and then the return back (up) into itself. Unlike the ancient Gnostic picture, however (which lasted among Balkan Bogomils and Provençal Cathars into the Middle Ages), matter was not taken to be evil; for Boehme, rather, the cosmos and the souls nurtured in it had to descend into what we have already identified as a 'necessary materialization', before folding back towards God (a vision of reascent not only already then present in much Sufi theosophy but in German and Netherlandish mystical writing as well).² The long-term impact of this *Überschau* becomes apparent later, when, after being mediated through the illuminism and romanticism of the eighteenth century, it is 'exotericized' in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Hegel.³

Intriguingly, comparable depths as these were being plumbed at the time when the eccentric and anti-clerical Eastern Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II took his court from Vienna to Prague, and it was there, with Protestant Kepler joining the Czech Catholic Tycho Brahe, Johann Pistorius trying to bridge the gulf between orthodox Catholicism and Jewish *Kabbalah*, and the Moravian utopian Johannes Comenius advancing his educational reforms, that *savants* could dream of resurrected stories of secret knowledge, a rebirth epitomized by

¹ See J. Boehme, *Aurora*, Dresden, 1610, here using phrases from the so-called *Confessions* (compil. W.S. Palmer), London, 1954 edn., pp. 53, 77-8. Cf. also A. Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic*, SUNY, Albany, 1991, Ch. 4.

² On the U-curve paradigm of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic-Gnostic trajectory very broadly conceived, Trompf, 'Macrohistory', *loc. cit.* The teaching of the mystical life as a Return to God, however, was already present in Germanic circles especially through writings of the fourteenth century Deventer school by Jan van Ruysbroek and Geerte de Groote.

³ For Boehme's legacy, start with P. Deghaye, 'Jacob Boehme and his Followers', in Faivre and Needleman (eds.), *op. cit.*, ch. 7. For his the influence of his concept of cosmic Unfolding (*Entfaltung*) on Hegel, e.g., E. Benz, *Les Sources mystiques de la philosophie romantique allemande*, Vrin, Paris, 1987 edn.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

alchemical transmutation into (symbolic) gold.¹ Whether it began as a spoof or not, moreover, the opening of the grave of a certain Christian Rosenkreutz in 1604 was said to spark the formation of a secret Protestant brotherhood (the Rosicrucians), who captured the northern European Lutheran imaginations as fulfilling apocalyptic expectations in a new age of revealed mysteries (why not say Gnosis?)² High hopes among Protestants, in fact, were temporarily centred in both Germany and England on Frederick V, the Elector Palatine (and king of Bohemia, ruling 1619-20), as embodying this (re-)‘enlightenment’ and recoverable ‘golden time’ politically.³ In this very atmosphere Francis Bacon might have averred in one breath that the moderns had progressed beyond the ancients, yet in another - as his more secretive announcements of a ‘great instauration and New Atlantis’ (1627) belie - he projected utopic visions of science as a return to a pre-lapsed Adamic state, and to a ‘sinless contact with nature’ hitherto lost to humanity.⁴ In this *modus ex occulto*, with other utopianists such as Tommaso Campanella adding to the mix of speculative minds, motifs of recovered esoteric truth abounded!

It is remarkable how these mystical and esoteric strands did not fray as quickly as we might have expected, and constituted durable habits of mind we will have to deal with well beyond the so-called

¹ For the details, esp. R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World: A Study in Intellectual History 1576-1612*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984 edn., pp. 281, cf. pp. 90ff.

² R.B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988, pp. 219-25 *et passim*, cf. J.W. Montgomery, *Cross and Crucible: Johann Valentin Andreae (1586-1654): Phoenix of the Theologians*, Archives internationales d'histoire des idées, 55, esp. Vol. 1, Sect. 4.

³ Thus Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972, pp. xi, 59, *et passim*; cf. E.A. Beller, *Caricatures of the Winter King of Bohemia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1928, p. 62 (quotation).

⁴ Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I, lxxxiv (pp. 276-7), yet *Praef. Instauratione Magna*, in *Works*, ed. J. Spedding *et al.*, Garrett, London, 1857, Vol. 1, p. 132; *New Atlantis*, London, 1627 (published posthumously). Cf. F. Yates, ‘The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science’, in C.S. Singleton (ed.), *Art, Science and History in the Renaissance*, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1968, pp. 266-7 (also for Cornelius Agrippa previously on the return to Adam's state).

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

Enlightenment of the next century.¹ Not a little fascination lies in the presence of these *mentalités* in the extraordinary opus of Sir Isaac Newton, who bequeathed at his death (in 1727) masses of unpublished, secret papers - some on alchemy, many on sacred chronology and apocalyptic interpretation.² Freemasonry, what is more, institutionalized secret rites as an Enlightenment foil to established religious practice, and within masonic lore we find that appeals to the mysteries of Mithra, Zoroaster, Hermes, Eleusis, Orpheus, and so forth went on *pari passu* with speculations about the Solomonic Temple and Kab[b]ala[h].³ But, with this persistence of an esoteric *air de famille* recognized, and even its resurgence in Romantic thought emphasized,⁴ we must reckon with its very considerable weakening before the impact of industrialization and positivist science. The very name 'Enlightenment', picking up on suggestions of 'the light within' (thus the Quakers) and illumination (seekers of wisdom called *illuminés*) can be read as a force of public information-building or encyclopaedism that was decidedly exoteric. It almost inevitably brought on esotericizing reactions, these coming to a head toward the end of the

-
- ¹ Of importance, C. Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine and Reform 1626-1660*, Duckworth, London, 1975, esp. Ch. 1; S. McKnight, *The Modern Age and the Recovery of Ancient Wisdom*, University of Missouri Press, 1991, Ch. 7; M. Greengrass et al. (eds.), *Samuel Hartlib and Universal Reformation: Studies in Intellectual Communication*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994; S. Åkerman, *Queen Christina and her Circle: The Transformation of a Seventeenth Century Libertine*, Brill, Leiden, 1991 (on Johannes Bureus); although note the tendency to avoid this 'scientific manner', in A.C. Crombie's magisterial *Styles of Scientific Thinking in the European Tradition*, Duckworth, London, 1994, 3 vols.
 - ² For help, G. W. Trompf, 'On Newtonian History', in S. Gaukroger (ed.), *The Uses of Antiquity*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1991, pp. 213-49; G. W. Trompf, 'Esoteric Isaac Newton and the Kabbalistic Noah: Natural Law between Mediaevalia and the Enlightenment', in W. Hanegraaff and J.A.M. Snoek (eds.), *Western Esotericism and Jewish Mysticism* (Gnostica, 6), Peeters, Louvain, 2003 (forthcoming).
 - ³ Summarizing the 'composite' of relevant materials, A. Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite*, Supreme Council of the Thirty-third Degree for the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, Charleton, 1871. Also, for well-known Masonic preoccupations with the mysteries of the Pyramid (of Cheops), P. Tompkins, *Secrets of the Great Pyramid*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978 edn., pp. 38, 195, 256-61.
 - ⁴ Start with A. McCalla, 'Romanticism', in W. Braun and R.T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Guide to the Study of Religion*, Cassell, New York, 2000, Ch. 25.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

eighteenth century with such remarkable and learned figures as Emmanuel Swedenborg in Sweden and the early Romantic historiosophs Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin and Pierre-Simon Ballanche in France.¹

Moving on to the nineteenth century, one must first appreciate how many expressions in the Romantic mode in its early decades amount to revulsions against the Industrial Revolution, and of turning from the visible 'dark Satanic mills' into an inner 'Jerusalem'.² Yet if the Romantics recaptured the mystery of nature that kept alive a perennial sensitivity - in which neo-Pythagorean number theology, al-Arabi's *Unity of Being*, and Mornay's *Bible of Nature* all found a comfortable place - the second half of the century spelt a disastrous victory for the exoteric, positivist and materialist approaches to the universe.

For, upon the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, plain naturalism (or 'ungoverned' natural selection) in an evolutionary process might seem to have provided a sufficient explanation for all life. If there was some principle behind it all, such a para-Darwinian thinker such as Herbert Spencer, or his German materialist counterpart Ernst Haeckel, were not prepared to 'know' - in their a-gnosticism or *agnoia* - what, let alone who, it was.³ 'Naturism,' that allowed a divine impetus behind the great Chain of Being, and *l'évolution*, first proposed by early 'vitalist' Charles Bonnet as a providential Unfolding of all life, were threatened as potentially *demodés* in face of 'purely physical' approaches to change.⁴

¹ For guidance, two articles in sequence: J. Williams-Hogan, 'The Place of Emmanuel Swedenborg in Modern Western Esotericism', and A. McCalla, 'Illuminism and French Romantic Philosophies of History', in *Western Esotericism*, *op. cit.*, Faivre and Hanegraaff (eds.), pp. 201-68

² Alluding to William Blake's poem by that name. In general, cf. M.H.Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1971.

³ H. Spencer, esp. *First Principles* [1862], Williams & Norgate, London, 1890, Pt. 1, Ch. 5; E. Haeckel, *The Riddle of the Universe* [1899], trans. J. McCabe, Watts & Co., London, 1929. Cf. G. W. Trompf, *In Search of Origins*, Oriental University Press, London, 1990, Ch. 1.

⁴ For background, A. Pope, *Essay on Man* (1732), I, viii; x; Goethe, *Botanical Writings*, trans. B. Mueller, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1952; esp. pp. 81-4; Bonnet, *Palingénésie philosophique* (1769-70), in *Œuvres d'histoire naturelle et de philosophie*, ed. S. Fauche, Neuchâtel, 1779-83, Vol. 7, esp. pp. 332, 365.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

Thus it was that the inimitable Russian foundress of the Theosophical Society, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, waged war against the new tide of evolutionist materialism with a radically alternative cosmology. Inheriting a Gnostico-Boehmian habitude of mind, yet using all the pertinent materials of comparative religion that the nineteenth-century European storehouses of information now made available, she developed a schema of descending psychico-spiritual beings, whose general path resulted in a necessary materialization in our observable world. This descent coalesced with the highest products of biological evolution, ascending towards human form from the humble organisms of the earth. These processes, though, work themselves out over great aeonic, macro-cyclical passages of time.¹ For all their contortedness and lack of contextual criticism, this re-picturing of the universe was the historico-cosmological agenda of Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), allegedly containing the solution to the current spiritual crisis.² Hers was a grandly programmatic esotericism, defensively appealing to the mysteries of the ages against the despoliations of a newer modernity (although railing in a very Enlightenment mode against the priestcraft and textual manipulations of established religion - especially a by-now 'imperial spread' Christianity). Her revisioning of things was, furthermore, very influential; the 'the Religion of Truth' (nothing was 'higher') found institutionalization in a Society that opened windows on Eastern traditions (Blavatsky and collaborator Colonel Olcott made it look as though they converted to Bud[d]hism in 1877) and seemed to make possible the 're-mystification' of Christianity (Charles

Cf., as background, A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1948, and for other, Boehmian, usages of evolution in the eighteenth century: E. Benz, *Sources mystiques*, *op. cit.*, esp. p. 58.

- ¹ See G. W. Trompf, 'Macrohistory in Blavatsky, Steiner and Guénon', in A. Faivre and W. Hanegraaff (eds.), *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion* (Gnostica, 2), Peeters, Louvain, 1998, pp. 274-86. The macro-cycles in Blavatsky's paradigm are adapted from Indian (Vedic) Kalpa theory.
- ² *Isis Unveiled: A Master-key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, H.W. Bouton, New York, 1893 edn., 2 vols.; *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, Theosophical University Press, Pasadena, 1963 repr., 2 vols.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

Leadebeater and the Liberal Catholic Church).¹ Without these developments the later mixture of esoterism and *de*-institutionalization in the New Age movement would have been unthinkable.²

We may conclude our all-to-brief and synoptic charting of exoteric/esoteric reactivities by discussing an issue that will help draw most of our threads together. It concerns the Masters. Those who have waded through Blavatsky's major works will appreciate that she claims to tap into a source beyond the known textual sources of the world's spiritualities: this is the so-called the Akashic record(s), a strange set of stanzas very Gnostic and emanationist in purport.³ And, upon further investigation, Akashic teaching comes - to put it simply - out of the Ethereal via accessible ('channelling') Masters, whose messages were relayed from within the most esoteric quarters of the Theosophical Society.⁴ These Masters are the occult spirit guides who subsist independently of the cyclo-evolutionary processes of the cosmos, and, significantly, it is their Truth that lies behind the teachings of the world religions' founders (though with the truths of the latter, we note, having been refracted by institutional religiosity).⁵ This hermeneutical move, of course, can be critiqued within its own or a purely Western historical context,⁶ but let us remark here how structurally akin the Theosophic Masters are to the hidden imams of Shi'ite Islam, sharing as they do both occultation and spiritual guidance. In terms of historical presence, moreover, the Theosophic Masters can manifest as religious founders, just as the Twelve of Ithna 'Ashariyah Shi'ism were formerly historical personages.

¹ On Blavatsky's [pre-Buddhist] 'Budhism', See A.J. Cooper, 'Introduction', to *The Letters of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky 1862-1882*, doctoral dissert., University of Sydney, Sydney, 1998, pp. lix (on Blavatsky to Burr, 19.11.1877).

² Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, *op. cit.*, esp. Ch.12.

³ See *Secret Doctrine*, pp. 27-34 *et passim*.

⁴ For guidance, B.J. French, 'The Theosophical Masters: An Investigation into the Conceptual Domains of H.P. Blavatsky and C.W. Leadbeater', doctoral dissert., University of Sydney, 2000, 2 vols. (to be published in the series Gnostica).

⁵ Investigating this aspect of Theosophy should begin with P. Sinnett, *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. & K.H.* ('Transcribed and Compiled by A. T. Barker'), 1923, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, 1962 edn., esp. Sect. 2.

⁶ See Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. xliv-lii.

From the Esoteric to the Exoteric and Back Again

Apart from the influences of Islamic thought on Blavatsky (for she did give an albeit superficial account of Sufism),¹ a last point to make concerns the Masters as founders of the world's religions. For, by and large, the bulk of New Age popular esoterists have laid aside the Masters of the Ashakic records (with the privileged access to them by members of the 'Esoteric Section').² In the current New Age ambience, the Masters are the more 'mellow' founder-teachers of the great religions - the authors of the Upanishads and Gita, the Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu, Jesus and the Sufi masters.³ And of course later 'living masters' who have comprehended these Masters and the Truth they reflect are added to the [master!-]list.⁴ The lines of thought to explain this shift require exploring. Already Blavatsky's contemporary Edouard Schuré wrote of the Masters in what has become the more enduring fashion.⁵ Interchanges between Theosophists and the followers Baha'ullah's more pacifist and Baha'i version of Iranian Babism shows how a *habitude* of looking at the great religious teachers as Masters/Messengers could percolate into Western thought from the Middle East.⁶ Early mention of Sufi masters also suggests the growing interest in the first half of the twentieth century reinforced an approach to religion-founders this way, and within later Sufism itself there had developed the insight that one 'Guiding Spirit' through time had manifested in various guises - Rama, Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Muhammad.⁷ Other interesting transitions come with

1 Esp. *Isis, op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 306.

2 See J. Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society 1975-1937*, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, 1938, pp. 206, 260-74.

3 See, e.g., P. Lemesurier, *This New Age Business*, Findhorn, Forres, Scot.: 1990.

4 Consider, e.g., C.P. Purdom, *The God-Man: The Life, Journey and Work of Meher Baba, etc.*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1961, esp. Pt. 2, Ch. 2.

5 *Les grands initiés: esquisse de l'histoire secrète des religions* [1889], Perrin, Paris, 1901 edn. (Eng. trans., Steinerbooks, Blauvelt, 1961) on the occult sequence Rama, Krishna, Hermes, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and Jesus.

6 Start with H.M. Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith*, George Ronald, London, 1970. Cf. also Baha'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Ill., 1985, pp. 3-4, 195-6, 197-200.

7 Start with H. Inayat Khan, *The Way of Illumination (A Guide-book to the Sufi Movement)*, Camelot, Southampton, n.d., p. 27 (on the dual sequence of Shiva, Buddha, Rama, Krishna and Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad). See also H.

Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

treatments of various religions as founded by Masters, with no mention of the Akasha, yet with an instance that only a 'living Master' can satisfy the current requirements for spiritual realization.¹ Such a Master would be more typically Indian, and usually with a *guru* lineage.² More recently still, Masters have had to give way to Mothers in our more feminist-affected atmosphere, but the esoteric element can still be brought to the fore (with ecstatic and local cultic expressions of the Mother thereby dissipating).³

Such permutations and outcomes carry many fascinations, although, as a general, concluding assessment, one may fairly affirm that the Master motif in New Age thought and activity moves towards the populist exoteric in a supermarket of contemporary religious choice, rather than invoking the secrecy of some spiritual cabal. By now the esoteric has become so widely appealed to for spiritual sustenance in the West, that it looks paradoxically to have denied its own point of existence. Considering the events of September 11 and October 12, however, it may have some new place in the exoteric world of dialogue between peace builders within the enormous and multifaceted axis of monotheistic religions. Certainly, the practitioners of Religious Studies, or Comparative Religion, would never approach comprehension of their discipline's full scope if the themes and interactions we have been describing were to be left unattended.

Inayat Khan, *The Unity of World Religions*, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1949, and cf. *supra*, ns. 75, 118.

- 1 J. Johnson, *The Path of the Masters* (1939), Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Delhi, 1980 edn, es. p. 175, and Ch. 2.
- 2 M. Murray, *Seeking the Master: A guide to the Ashrams of India*, Spearman, London, 1980. For a quirkish Westernizing reversal, A. Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions*, Open Court, Chicago, 1997.
- 3 J. Thomas, 'Looking Forward, Looking Back: Mother Figures in Contemporary Hinduism', Honours dissert., University of Sydney, 1994. I note here Gnosticizing features in Sahaj Yoga whereby the original Knowledge of Jesus has been seen as distorted in the present text of the *New Testament* by false teachings and institutionalizing pressures.