A R T I G O S

The "right way" of Hermetism:

disputes on Gnostic's, Pagan's and Christian's (re-)visions of the Hermetic phonomenon in late antiquity

This paper aims to understand the phenomenon of Hermetism though the perspective of its process of reception and reproduction in society. It will explore the phenomenon that was the transformation of the Hermetica into a social discourse. The so-called technical and philosophical Hermetica are texts. A text is the result of a production: it is composed by men, and addressed to men. It is important to consider the intentions and values present in a text's production, and to understand that its process of reception and reproduction in society are, in fact, complex and dynamic.

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1. Hermetists - Groups of Reception and Interpretation of Hermetic literature

There was no known attempt to organise the Hermetic literature into a canon - as a codification for the Hermetic doctrine. However, private libraries/collections could compose different anthologies of Hermetic treatises, and consequently promote a thematic/partial selection of those texts. For the audience/readers/receptors of such literature was/were free to select them according to individual preferences for specific topics. To call the producer and receptor as Hermetists could be useful didactically; however, it must be clear that "Hermetist" was by no means a way of self-perception in Graeco-Roman age or in late antiquity either. As a result, it is necessary to compare some distinct processes of appropriation of the Hermetic literature and its respective interpretation as social proposals aiming at respective social groups. Each group promotes a specific relationship with the texts, since they offer different social contexts and perspectives of how to interact with the Hermetica. Therefore, in this study, the term "Hermetist" is a generic term used to define all those who took part in the process of production, reception and circulation of Hermetic texts. So, *a priori,* in Graeco--Roman Egypt, a Hermetist could belong to any social

category, with any cultural identity and hold any number of possible political/ ideological/ religious inclinations.

It is not possible nowadays to achieve any accord about how the so-called technical and philosophical Hermetic literatures were used. Distinct groups with specific interests could produce new interpretations for Hermetic treatises and proposals for its own use as well. Questions concerning inconsistencies and/ or lacunas were most simply solved by admitting that the text was an imperfect translation of 'a lost Egyptian original'. Moreover, the debate on Hermetic treatises never ceased, so those lacunas could be "explained" by interpretations promoted by the debate between Hermetica and other sources, such as Philosophy in some Hermetist circles. It is clear that different uses of Hermetica could produce different interpretations for this literature. These different groups taking part in the process of the text's interpretation represented different possibilities for the text's assimilation (as knowledge to be understood), and definition (as a phenomenon to be explained). Following this, one or more groups in society can use its/their symbolic power in order to propose/impose what Bourdieu[1] defined as *consensus*, or social order concerning social integration. This process establishes what the general knowledge calls "sense of order/normality" in the social dimension. Symbolic systems are also utilized as instruments for the legitimacy of ideologies, aiming to assure the domination of one social group over another. By approaching the engagement of social groups in the process of significance with regards to the Hermetic phenomenon, this paper establishes a debate on how the Hermetica as literary source could become part of the social discourse regarding antagonist worldviews. Therefore, it will discuss the relationship between the so-called technical and philosophical[2] Hermetica, and their interpretations by respective groups of receptors in society.

2. *Hermetic Mysticism and Gnostics*

"Gnostics" were defined by the words of Plotinus as esoteric/magic multifaceted groups with several variant doctrines. They labeled the world as an evil place and claimed that learning a secret knowledge (or *gnosis*) was the unique form of escaping from it. There were pagan and Christian Gnostic groups as well, and due to the lack of formal codification, both currents were able to use each other's concepts and literature. It is not impossible that Hermetism had different degrees of influence over different Gnostic sects. Indeed, there is a sixth-century reference regarding Valentinian Gnostic cult called the "Hermaoi".[3] The contact of Gnostics with Hermetic au-

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[1] P. Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique.* (Paris: 1980). See also: P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power.* (Harvard: 1991).

[2] Definitions proposed by Festugière in order to separate Hermetic texts with more emphasis on astrology, magic, alchemy , and other esoteric affairs, from those he classified as more connected to theological and philosophic digressions. See: A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d`Hermès Trismégiste.* (Paris: 1944--54).

[3] See: G. Fowden, The Egyptian Hermes. (Princeton: 1993), p. 173, n.72: "Tim. Const., Haer., 17b; and Marc. Anc., Eccl. 6, mentioning "the followers of Hermes and Seleucus" in a list of Gnostics and other heretics […]."

thors is not discarded, nor is the possibility of some degree of mutual influences between Christian/Pagan Gnosticism and Hermetism.[4]

The Gnostic community at Nag Hammadi used Hermetic treatises as part of their sources. Gnostic adepts and doctrines used to exchange knowledge with one another and also took information from external beliefs, traditions, etc. The Hermetic treatises were no exception for the Gnostic usages of external sources in their systems. The Gnostic library of a community at Nag Hammadi is a good example of it.[5] Among the Hermetic texts found at Nag Hammadi, there was a previously unknown discourse, which depicts the protagonists of the Hermetica living in a Gnostic-like environment. The Nag Hammadi Hermetica portrayed a specific social reality. In these texts, it is possible to confirm the existence of another way of reception of the Hermetic texts: the communal study of a group/fraternity/confrary.[6] That style of Hermetic dialogue was totally new, since, in comparison, the anthology called the *Corpus Hermeticum* had two protagonists: the master and the disciple, and in *ad Aslcepius*, Hermes teaches Asclepius along with Tat and Ammon.

In the Hermetica from the *Nag Hammadi Library*, Hermes encourages Tat to teach others, and the discourse reveals the existence of many others spiritual sons who were also educated by Hermes.

> After I had received the spirit through the power, I set forth the action for you. Indeed the understanding dwells in you; in me (it is) as though the power were pregnant. For I when conceived from the fountain that flowed to me, I gave birth)
> My father, you have spoken every word well to me. But I am amazed at this statement that you have just made. For you said "The power is in me"
> He said, "I gave birth to it (the power), as children are born.
> Then my father, I have many brothers, if I am to be numbered among the offspring. Right, my son! [...]. (NHH. VI-6 52, 6-7).

After the instruction, follows a ceremonial kiss/embrace:[7]

> "Let us embrace each other affectionately, my son." (NHH. VI-6 57,26).

Furthermore, it follows a prayer with Hermes, Tat, and Tat's spiritual brothers.

> My father, begin the discourse on the eighth and the ninth, and include me also with my brothers.

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[4] For a specific case study on Poimandres, See: J. Büchli, Der Poimandres, ein paganisiertes Evangelium. (Tübingen: 1987).

[5] The collection of books contains religious and Hermetic texts, works of moral maxims, Apocryphal texts, and a rewriting of Plato's Republic.

[6] Reizenstein held that Hermetists could have lived in Gnostic-like "Hermetic communities", while Festugière was against such theory See: R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres - Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur*, (Leipzig: 1904), p. 248. Festugière`s argument against that theory: A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d`Hermès Trismégiste I.* (Paris: 1944), pp.81-4.

[7] See: M. Krause, "Der Stand der Veröffentlichung der Nag Hammadi-Texte". In: U. Bianchi (ed.), *Le Originni dello Gnosticismo* – Colloquio di Messina, 13-18 Aprile 1966. (Leiden: 1967), pp.87. "Lasst uns einander küssen (ἀσπάζεσθαι)." This ceremonial kiss and prayer are repeated in Codex VI-7, 65 3f. See also: J. Holzhausen, *Das Corpus Hermeticum-Deutsch II.* (Stuttgart- Bad Cannstatt:: 1997), pp.518; and J. M. Robinson (ed.) *The Nag Hammadi Library*. (New York: 1990). This ceremonial kiss is repeated in VI-7, 65, 5 and note that both in Robinson's and Holzhausen's text, the translation for ἀσπάζεσθαι is to embrace / umarmen, instead of to kiss.

> Let us pray, my son, to the father of the universe, with your brothers who are my sons, that he may give the spirit of eloquence. (NHH. VI-6 53, 25-31).

There is a passage on holy aliments that were "without blood" and that concerned a ceremonial banquet:

> When they said these things in the prayer, they embraced each other and they went to eat their holy food, which no blood in it. (NHH. VI-7, 5-7).[8]

The possibility of the existence of several other religious/esoteric communities using or even producing Hermetic texts is not discarded. According to Quispel, such Hermetic communities or associations may have existed under a structure similar to that of the former Classical mystery religions:

> [...] it has become certain that the Hermetic Gnosis was routed in a secret society in Alexandria, a sort of Masonic lodge, with certain rites like a kiss of peace, a baptism of rebirth in the spirit and a sacred meal of the brethren. It started with the astrologic lore contained in works like the Hermetic *Panaretos*, of the second century before the beginning of the Common Era. [...] Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews were members of the Hermetic lodge and unanimously contributed their specific traditions to the common views. Christian influences, however, are completely absent.[9]

It is certain that Hermetism projected no organised cult, with priests, sacrifices, processions and the like. Nevertheless, the Hermetic texts of Nag Hammadi suggest the existence of small Hermetic communities, or groups, in which individual experiences and insights were collectively celebrated with rituals, hymns and prayers. Despite the dispute concerning whether or not Hermetists were socially organised or how that organisation was structured, it is important to note that there were no formal recommendations found in any part of the Hermetic doctrine concerning social organisation. Nevertheless, the existence of more formally organised Hermetic communities/associations will also "produce" its own Hermetic discourses in order to promote symbolic legitimacy and regulation of the group's social *consensus*. This means that the Hermetic texts influenced the development of specific social organizations, and/or helped support them symbolically. Another dimension of that influence can be found in the indirect presence of Hermetic elements in non-Hermetic literary sources.

3. Philosophical Hermetica and Christian Thought

Christianism started in a poor and remote Roman province and was a small branch of Judaism. When it split from Judaism as an independent religion, it first

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[8] M. Krause *op.cit.,* p. 80, excerpt from Codex VI-7, 65 5-7: "Als sie das gesagt hatten, indem sie beteten, küssten sie einander und gingen, um ihre heilige Nahrung zu essen, in der kein Blut ist." Note that vegetarianism was also a norm of Pythagorean communities, and that blood in aliments was also part of a social-religious taboo in Judaism. See also: J. Holzhausen, *Das Corpus Hermeticum-Deutsch II*. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: 1997), p. 537; and: K. –W. Tröger, *Mysterienglaube und Gnosis in Corpus Hermeticum XIII*. (Berlin: 1971), pp. 121, 133-4.

[9] G. Quispel: "The Asclepius". In : R. Van den Broek, W.J.Hanegraaff, W.J, *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, (New York: 1998), p. 74.

grew in popularity among slaves and poor segments of the population and faced many periods of political persecution. However, in just few centuries it was already consolidated as the official religion of the Roman Empire, and also of its neighbours Ethiopia and Armenia.[10] Such rapid growth produced diversity in the interpretations of this religion. Therefore, it was necessary to develop some epistemology to codify the beliefs and also to promote a unified position against rivals such the pagan religions and Christian divergent sects – or heretics.[11] This process of codification was deeply based in the debate between Christian ideology and philosophic systems, whose authors were not necessarily exclusive Christians, but could be interpreted in a favourable sense.

Origen (2nd/3rd centuries A.D) and Augustine of Hippo (4th/5th centuries A.D) are good examples of this "Christian intellectual war" on paganism and heresies.[12] On the other hand, Porphyry of Tyre in *Contra Christianos* criticizes Origen's appropriation of Greek allegorical methods of interpretation to explain the Jewish scriptures.[13] Indeed, in the late 4th century A.D Emperor Julian - called "the Apostate" by Christians - attempted to remove some of the power of the Christian schools, which, during this time and following time periods, used ancient Greek literature in their teachings, in an effort to present the Christian religion as superior to paganism.[14] We know that Tertullian, Cyrill and Augustin were reading Hermetic texts, collections and/or anthologies. They rejected its Paganism, but noted that similarities could be found within their theology. The early Christian Fathers went as far as to quote the Hermetic texts in their campaign against heresies.

3.1 Tertullian of Carthage as a Hermetist

The Hermetic doctrine was a useful source for the so-called *Patristica Latina*. Some principles in Tertullian's thought are deeply based or influenced by his debate with the Hermetic doctrine – among other philosophic schools and traditions.

a) *The true Gnosis came from God alone and cannot be taught:*

In his tractate against Gnostics (early 3rd century A.D), Tertullian called "*Mercurius Trismegistus*", the father of all natural sciences/ occultism[15]. In his work *de Anima* he declared that true knowledge cannot be taught, but can only be given by God:

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[10] See: J. L. González, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 1: The Early Church to the Reformation*. (San Francisco: 1984).

[11] In fact, the heresies were deemed as the greatest threat to Christianism, since different Christian sects promoted independent efforts of evangelization (especially among the belligerent Germanic tribes), spreading their heresies and the ideological conflict.

[12] Against the popular cults of Isis, Mithra and Cybele, see Augustin's *City of God* VII, 23-26.

[13] Cf. Porphyry, *Contra Christianos, Frag. 39.*

[14] See: G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*. (London: 1978), and W. Hamilton (ed. and transl.), *Ammianus Marcellinus, The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354-378).* (New York: 1986).

[15] *Adversus Valentinianos* XV, 1. On the matter of "*magister omnium physicorum*", see comments in : J. –C. Fredouille (transl.) *Tertullien: Contra les Valentiniens*. Tome II (Paris: 1980), pp. 280-1. It is not very clear if physicorum is used here as an allusion to the wisdom of nature of the world hence *physicus* would be used in the ancient sense of φυσικός - , or if it was connected to the Hellenistic sense of expertise in occultism. In fact, both interpretations fit with the general knowledge concerning Hermes Trismegistos.

Of course we shall not deny that philosophers have sometimes thought the same things as ourselves. The testimony of truth is the issue thereof. [...] In nature, however, most conclusions are suggested, as it were, by that common intelligence wherewith God has been pleased to endow the soul of man. This intelligence has been caught up by philosophy, and, with the view of glorifying her own art, has been inflated (it is not to be wondered at that I use this language) with straining after that facility of language which is practised in the building up and pulling down of everything, and which has greater aptitude for persuading men by speaking than by teaching. [...]She thought, no doubt, that she was deriving her mysteries from sacred sources, as men deem them, because in ancient times most authors were supposed to be (I will not say godlike, but) actually gods: as, for instance, the Egyptian Mercury, to whom Plato [16] paid very great deference; [...]. (*De Anima* II, 1-3).

Such position was indeed in agreement with the Hermetic doctrine:

The virtue of soul, [...], is knowledge; for one who knows is goodand reverent and already divine. [...] There are senses in all things that are because they cannot exist without them – yet knowledge differs greatly from sensation; for sensation comes when the object prevails, while knowledge is the goal of learning, and learning is a gift from God." (CH. X, 9).

b) *The connection between heart and soul:*

Tertullian also agreed with the Hermetic doctrine by identifying the heart as the core of the soul's energy:

Whether there be in the soul some supreme principle of vitality and intelligence [...] as the Egyptians have always taught, especially such of them as were accounted the expounders of sacred truths in accordance, too, with that verse of Orpheus or Empedocles: "Man has his (supreme) sensation in the blood around his heart. *(De Anima, XV, 1-5).*

For Hermes also said that the heart is responsible for discerning God.[17]

Look up with the eyes of the heart [...]. Then seek a guide to take you by the hand and lead you to the portals of knowledge. [...] All are sober and gaze with the heart toward one who wishes to be seen, who is neither heard nor spoken of, who is seen not with the eyes but with mind and heart. (CH. VII, 1-3).

c) *On the human soul's nature*

In his understanding of the human soul, he denied the Pythagorean and Hermetic principles of reincarnation[18] and the pre-existence of a human soul:[19]

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[16] Cf. *Phaedrus* C. LIX; Augustin *City of God* VIII,11; Euseb. *Praep. Evang*. IX, 3.

[17] The spiritual role played by the heart was already shown in the Egyptian history. However, it must be clear that to Graeco-Roman general knowledge, the Hermetic doctrine was indeed the translation of pure Egyptian traditions.

[18] In *Corpus Hermeticum* IV, 8, reincarnation is mentioned as being necessary to the process of allowing Man to achieve the perfection of his soul.

[19] On the other hand, the Neo-Platonist and Christian apologist Origen believed in the pre-existence of Soul. Cf.: *De Principiis* I. 2,10; I. 7,4; II. 9, 1.

> What, then, by this time means that ancient saying, mentioned by Plato, concerning the reciprocal migration of souls; how they remove hence and go thither, and then return hither and pass through life, and then again depart from this life, and afterwards become alive from the dead? Some will have it that this is a saying of Pythagoras; Albinus supposes it to be a divine announcement, perhaps of the Egyptian Mercury. (*De Anima* XXVIII, 1).

Tertullian's account of the destiny of the human soul after death is quoted directly from the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

> I must here also remark, that if souls undergo a transformation, they will actually not be able to accomplish and experience the destinies which they shall deserve; and the aim and purpose of judicial recompense will be brought to nought, as there will be wanting the sense and consciousness of merit and retribution. And there must be this want of consciousness, if souls lose their condition; and there must ensue this loss, if they do not continue in one stay. But even if they should have permanency enough to remain unchanged until the judgment,—a point which Mercurius Aegyptius recognised, when he said that the soul, after its separation from the body, was not dissipated back into the soul of the universe, but retained permanently its distinct individuality, "in order that it might render," to use his own words, "an account to the Father of those things which it has done in the body;"— (even supposing all this, I say,) I still want to examine the justice, the solemnity, the majesty, and the dignity of this reputed judgment of God, and see whether human judgment has not too elevated a throne in it—exaggerated in both directions, in its office both of punishments and rewards, too severe in dealing out its vengeance, and too lavish in bestowing its favour. *(De Anima* XXXIII, 2).

He quotes the following passage:

> [...]The gods sowed the generation of humans to know the works of God; to be a working witness to nature; to increase the number of mankind; to master all things under heaven; to discern the things that are good; [...] and through the wonder-working of the cycling gods they created every soul incarnate to contemplate heaven, the course of the heavenly gods, the works of God and the working of nature; [...]." (CH. III, 3).

In fact, through his knowledge of the philosophic aspects of the Hermetic doctrine, Tertullian demonstrated that Christian Hermetists were also debating this doctrine to the point of producing direct quotations in their texts, as well as agreements and disagreements on subjects presented by Hermetic literature. Accepting and refusing aspects of the Hermetic (and other) doctrine is enough to establish that such literature took part in Christian intellectual digressions during the construction of a "Christian system of belief".

3.2 Cyrill of Alexandria as a Hermetist

Hermetic texts were also inspiration for the *Patristica Graeca*. Hermetic discourses were also present in the arguments of Cyrill of Alexandria, who wrote a postumous response to Emperor Julian's tractate against Christians in the 5th century A.D. In his antithesis: "*Contra Iulianum*", Cyrill considers the Hermetic texts – here

called the "Hermaic Books" (Ἑρμαϊκὰ) - a legacy of a wise human being who was deified by Egyptians in posterior generations.

> Pour en venir aux comparisons, n'entends-tu pas dire que notre compatriot Hermès a divisé l'ensemble de l'Égypte en parts et en lots, mesurant au cordeau les terresa-rables ? Qu'il a tracé des fossés en vue de l'inrrigation, a institué les districts territo-riaux et donné des noms d'après ces districts ? Qu'il a mis en forme les stipulations contractuelles ? (…) Qu'enfin il a imaginé les nombres, le calcul, la géométrie, l'as-tronomie, l'astrologie, les arts, la gramaire, et les a transmis ? (*Contra Julianum,* I, 548 B-C).[20]

Following the same observations as that of Clement and Tertullian, Cyril links Hermes to natural (numbers, astronomy) and supernatural (astrology) brands of knowledge.

a) *God as the divine creative Logos*

On the subject of the creative divine Verb, he also quoted Hermes three times by saying, firstly:

> Hermès Trismégiste parle ainsi de Dieu: "Son Verbe (Logos), procédant de lui, par-fait, fécond et créateur, tomba avec sa nature féconde sur l'eau déconde et rendit l'eau prégnante [...] Et du même, dans une autre passage: "C'est donc la pyramide qui sert de fondement à la Nature et au monde spirituel, car elle a au-dessus d'elle, qui la do-mine, le Verbe créateur du Maître de toutes choses, [...]. (*Contra Julianum,* I, 552 D).

The Logos of God creating the world is debated in CH. IV. It is interesting to note that Hermes adopted a bowl full of Nous as a metaphor and shared it only with those special souls of men who had faith.

> He (God) filled a great mixing bowl (Κρατῆρα μέγαν) with it (Νους), appointing a herald whom he commanded to make the following proclamation to human hearts: "Immerse yourself in the mixing bowl (Βάπτισον σεαυτὴ ἡ δυναμέν εἰς τοῦτον τὸν κρατῆρα) if your heart has the strength, if it believes you will rise up again to the one who sent the mixing bowl bellow, if it recognizes the purpose of your coming to be." [...]. (CH. IV, 4).

The connection to the Christian sacrament of baptism is undeniable. It could be explained by the Hermetic view as a representation of God's sharing of Nous with selected souls. On the other hand, it could also reflect how at some point a Christian view of Hermetism become integrated into the Hermetic doctrine. In that sense, the herald may be understood as a reference to Jesus, inviting humanity, on God's be-half, to a share of immortality through his calling/Logos.

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[20] P. Burgière, P. Évieux (transl.) *Cyrille d'Alexandrie Contre Julien - vol.1.* (Paris: 1985). The authors com-ment in p. 188, that this text is not part of the known Corpus Hermeticum. It is possible according to Burgière-Évieux that Cyrill was using some lost apologetic Hermetic text.

The second reference to the Hermetic doctrine concerning the divine Logos/Verb comes from an unknown fragment of a dialogue between Hermes and Agathos Daimon:

> Le même Hermès, à la question d'un desservant de sanctuaire égyptien qui lui demande: "Pourquoi, Très grand Bon Génie (ὦ μέγιστε ἀγατὸς δαίμων), le Verbe a-t-il été appelé de ce nom par le Seigneur de l'univers?", répond ainsi : "Je te l'ai dejà dit à une précédente occasion, mais tu n'as pas compris. La nature du Verbe spirituel de Dieu est une nature générative et créatrice. (*Contra Julianum,* I, 553 B).

Then, Cyrill mentioned another Hermetic tractate aiming to explain the Christian description of God as the Father:

> Hermès encore, au livre I de son Commentaire détaillé à Tat, parle ainsi de Dieu : "Le Verbe du Créateur, mon enfant, est éternel, se meut lui-même, est insensible à la croissance, à la diminution, au changement, à la corruption; unique, il est tourjours semblable à lui-même, égal, uniforme, stable, ordonné, seul à exister après le Dieu conçu comme primordial. " Et par cette expression, il désigne, je crois, le Père. (*Contra Julianum,* I, 553 A).

Thus, the philosophical/theological aspects of the Hermetic doctrine were openly accepted as being compatible with most Christian perceptions of God.

b) *On the human incapacity concerning to understand God, the Father*

Cyrill followed Hermes' arguments in order to explain how impossible it was for a human being to describe or even to understand God:

> Hermès Trismégiste s'exprime à peu près comme suit: "Concevoir Dieu est difficile, l'exprimer est impossible, même pour qui peut le concevoir : c'est en effect la tradutction de l'incorporel par du corporel qui est impossible, comme l'est aussi la compréhension du parfait par l'imparfait [...] Et Hermès ajoute ailleurs : "Ne prétends plus jamais, en songeant à cet être unique, à ce seul Bien, que rien lui soit impossible : la totalité de la puissance, c'est lui. [...]." (*Contra Julianum,* I, 549 B-C ; 552 D).

In *Corpus Hermeticum* Hermes explains to Tat that prayer is the only possible way to feel the presence of God:

> You, then, Tat, my child, pray first to the Lord, the Father, the Father, the only, who is not but from whom the one comes; ask him the grace to enable you to understand so great a god, to permit even one rai of his to illuminate your thinking. Only understanding, because it, too, is invisible, sees the invisible, and if you have the strength, Tat, your mind's eye will see it. (CH. V, 2).

He goes on to explain that God can be noted only by one's Nous:

> This is the god who is greater than any name; this is the god invisible and entirely visible. This god who is evident to the eyes may be seen in the mind. He is bodiless and many-bodied; or, rather, He is all-bodied. There is nothing that he is not, for he also is all that is, and this is why he has all names, because they are of one father, and this is why He has no name, because he is the father of all. (CH.V, 10).

Indeed, Cyrill quoted the description of God as eternal Logos, the Supreme Good and Father of all, as given also by *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 18-19; II, 14-17. Concerning the perception of God by humans, Cyrill observed that it was not possible to directly perceive God using sensorial faculties and used Hermetic texts to reinforce his beliefs once more:

> J'ajouterai à cette citation ce qu'a jadis écrit Hermés Trismégiste A son esprit ('Πρὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ Νοῦν') (c'est là titre du livre) : "Ainsi donc, dis-tu, Dieu est invisible? Trêve de blasphèmes! Qui plus que lui est visible? S'il a créé, c'est pour qu'on le voie à travers toute chose. L'excellence de Dieu, sa vertu, c'est de se manifester à travers toute chose !" (*Contra Julianum,* II, 580 B).

Cyrill quotes the teaching of Nous to Hermes:

> And you say, "God is unseen"? – Hold your tongue! Who is more visible than God? This is why he made all things: so that through them all you might look on him. This is the goodness of God; this is his excellence: that he is visible through all things. [...]. (CH. XI, 22).

He again returns to this subject and call Hermes as a witness to his argument that the act of creating was, in fact, part of God's nature:

> Voici en effect ce qu'écrit A Asklèpius celui qu'on appelle Hermès Trismégiste, parlant de la nature du Tout : S'il est vrai qu'on admet deux êtres, celui qui naît et celui qui crée, l'unité fond en un seul celui qui précède et celui qui suit ; or celui qui précède, c'est le Dieu créateur, et celui qui suit c'est l'être qui naît, quel qu'il soit. [...] La gloire indivisible de Dieu est de créer toute chose, et le pouvoir créateur est comme le corps de Dieu. [...]" Plus loin, Hermès parle en termes plus chaleureux, en apportant un example manifeste: "Ainsi donc, il est permis à un même peintre de représenter le ciel, la terre, la mer, des dieux, des hommes toute sorte d'êtres privés de raison et d'âme, et Dieu est incapable de créer tout ce qui existe ? Ô comble de stupidité, profonde ignorance de ce qui touche Dieu! [...]." (*Contra Julianum,* II, 600 A-B).

Such debate regarding the definition of God is present in the following texts: Corpus Hermeticum: CH. I, 21; II 5-12, God as the Supreme good in II, 14-16 and VI; on the possibility of a man learning on God, CH. III, 3; V, 2-6; The impossibility of describing God is present as subject in: CH I, 30, IX, 1-6. In *ad Asclepius* God is a widely debated as subject in 8-22.

3.3 Christians and their separation of Hermetica

The separation of Technical/Practical/Occult and Philosophical/Theological/Theoretical Hermetica is rather a didactic measure than a *de facto* perception of the phenomenon as a whole by its contemporaries. Festugière argued that "philosophic Hermetism" and "occult Hermetism" had little to do with each other.[21] However, Fowden has argued that the two bodies of literature were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they should be understood as components of a single Hermetic worldview.[22] Nonetheless, this debate returned to this point of study in order to ex-

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[21] A. -J. Festugière, *op.cit.*
[22] G. Fowden, *op.cit.*

pose the idea that the Christian perception of the Hermetic phenomenon was indeed dual in its nature. It has been demonstrated through examples how the Christian doctrine was compatible with the hermetic cosmogony. In addition, it has been made clear just how prepared the early Christian Fathers were for debating and comparing Christianism and Hermetism. However, such disposition in dialogue with the theological and philosophical dimensions of the Hermetic literature vanishes when subjects concerning magic and the other occult wisdoms are added to the discourse.

Tertullian generally defined all magic, oracles, spirit evocations, and magicians as essentially evil:

> What after this shall we say about magic? [...]it is an imposture. But it is not we Christians only whose notice this system of imposture does not escape. We, it is true, have discovered these spirits of evil, not, to be sure, by a complicity with them, but by a certain knowledge which is hostile to them; nor is it by any procedure which is attractive to them, but by a power which subjugates them that we handle (their wretched system) - that manifold pest of the mind of man, that artificer of all error, that destroyer of our salvation and our soul at one swoop. In this way, even by magic, which is indeed only a second idolatry, wherein they pretend that after death they become demons, just as they were supposed in the first and literal idolatry to become gods (and why not? since the gods are but dead things), [...]. So also in that other kind of magic, which is supposed to bring up from Hades the souls now resting there, and to exhibit them to public view, there is no other expedient of imposture ever resorted to which operates more powerfully. Of course, why a phantom becomes visible, is because a body is also attached to it; and it is no difficult matter to delude the external vision of a man whose mental eye it is so easy to blind. The serpents which emerged from the magicians' rods, certainly appeared to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians as bodily substances. (*De Anima*, LVII).

Note that Tertullian is not denouncing magic as a lie. He condemned its adoption as a fake system, by accusing it of being product of demoniac activity. This negative impression of magic led Lactantius to call Hermes Trismegistos "Lord of Demons" (δαιμονιάρχης).[23] In fact, Christian literature reproduced the stereotype representing magicians as compulsory deceivers and natural antagonists of the Christian faith, represented by saints and apostles.[24] However, Tertullian delimited the existence of good magic as Christian miracle, for when Christians managed to summon spirits of the dead it is God and not demons who are operating the miracle:

> The power of God has, no doubt, sometimes recalled men's souls to their bodies, as a proof of His own transcendent rights; but there must never be, because of this fact, any agreement supposed to be possible between the divine faith and the arrogant pretensions of sorcerers, and the imposture of dreams, and the licence of poets. But yet in all cases of a true resurrection, when the power of God recalls souls to their bodies, either by the agency of prophets, or of Christ, or of apostles, a complete presumption is afforded us, by the solid, palpable, and ascertained reality (of the revived body),

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[23] *Lact. Div. Inst*. II 14,6. In: J. Holzhausen, *Das Corpus Hermeticum-Deutsch II*. (Stuttgart- Bad Cannstatt: 1997), p. 575.

[24] There are too many examples. For cases described in the New Testament: Simon, the nemesis of Peter, in: Acts VIII, 9-25; And for Elymas, the rival of Paul, in: Acts XIII, 8-12.

that its true form must be such as to compel one's belief of the fraudulence of every incorporeal apparition of dead persons. (*De Anima,* LVII).

There was an apparent contradiction in the Tertullian double definition of magic in the axis: Us-divine-allowed vs. Then-demoniac-forbidden. Conversely, the early Christian texts railing against pagan and heretic practises were more concerned with expelling the other gods/beliefs than establishing their own. In this sense, Tertullian is claiming the monopoly over magic for Christians rather than condemning the practice itself.[25] Such an attempt to exclude rivals instead of convincing adversaries was recurrent in this branch of Christian literature. Pagan gods and religious practices were tolerant and non-excluding about themselves, but belief in the Christian god could not tolerate other gods or religious behaviours. In this sense, it would have been a huge contradiction if Christians integrally accepted a doctrine which dismissed the necessity of a Church or any formal clergy as precondition to achieving Heaven/God. Indeed, Hermetism accepted the existence of other gods and, at the same time, claimed that the salvation of one's soul was an individual and solitary enterprise. Rituals and Processions were deemed as futile and even such seemlingy innocuous activities such as burning incense while praising God were not only considered unnecessary but also offensive to God.

In this sense, Christian usage of the Hermetica should be limited to certain specific subjects. This selective perception of Hermetism is present in the commentary of Augustin, bishop of Hippo, to whom some aspects of the Hermetic doctrine were not the work of the Holy Spirit, but of a spirit of lies. Nonetheless, on its philosophical/theological aspect he had to admit that:

> [...] regarding the one, true God, the creator of the world, he (i.e. Hermes) indeed says much that corresponds with the truth. (City of God, VIII, 23).[26]

Therefore, during the process of codification of the Christian doctrine, a functional division of the Hermetic literature was promoted based on its content. Early Christian thinkers assimilated the parts of the Hermetica that were in harmony with the Christian doctrine. When some content was more connected to the pagan mentality or to heresies such as the Gnostic sects, it was corrected as a misunderstanding, or repelled as demonic.

4. Technical Hermetica and Pagan Thought

Taking a different route than the Christian Hermetists, the pagan milieu endorsed the technical and philosophical aspects of the Hermetic doctrine with the same def-

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[25] See: P. Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* (Paris: 1992). The author explains how the Christians claimed that it was possible to convince people of their views by convincing people to trust them. Furthermore, there was indeed a war for knowledge between Christians and Pagans, hence the interest in assuring in the discourse that only Christians were able to produce true knowledge. Cicero debated the idea of religion to be nothing more than political fiction, aiming to promote social order and respect for a specific institutional autority in *De Natura Deorum.*

[26] D. S. Wiesen (transl.) *Augustin : City of God* - Loeb Classical Library - Book III (London: 1968).

erence. Magic was very popular in the pagan milieu, especially regarding love charms, divine protection, avenging human enemies and necromancy. According to Pinch:

> Most surviving Egyptian magic is concerned with protection or healing. In the Graeco-Egyptian papyri, magic is often motivated by the desire for sexual pleasure, financial gain and social success.[27]

Magicians were not necessarily as evil as portrayed in Christian literature, but indeed celebrated as extraordinary individuals, even to the point of holiness.[28] The general belief in Egypt was that Hermes Trismegistos was the link between contemporary times and the lost idealised Egyptian past. Emperor Julian commented in the 4th century A.D that:

> [...] the Egyptians, as they reckon up the names of not a few wise men among themselves, can boast that they possess many successors of Hermes, I mean of Hermes who in his third manifestation visited Egypt. (Contra Galelaeans 176 AB).[29]

The reproduction of such "ancestry" as a social discourse deliberately ignored all external[30] cultural influences, such as Babylonian, or Hebrew, for instance. According to Fowden:

> [...] the evidence for substantial continuities between the Egyptian priestly literature and the technical Hermetica is patchy, not surprisingly in view of Egypt's successive exposure to Babylonian influences [...] But Graeco-Egyptian magic, which was to a large extent conceived of a Hermetic, can certainly be seen in terms of translation and interpretation of native materials; and the same can not be said of Hermetic alchemy and astrology [...]."[31]

Technical Hermetica were a demonstration of the divine dimension of men. It has already been explained that God created Man and sent him to Earth in order to rule over the creation with his share of the divine Logos. Man's older brother, the Cosmos, creator of the seven spheres and their gods (i.e. stars, constellations) gave him a share of each god's virtue, in order to assist him during his experiences in the material world. This principle establishes Man as superior to the gods, since he belongs to a superior sphere of existence. In this sense, philosophical and technical Hermetica are essentially interconnected. So, despite Hermetism's borrowing from Aristotelian, Stoic, Platonic and Jewish thought[32], the Hermetic doctrine articulated its occultism and philosophy in such consistent form that it managed to insert its influence into the development of new systems of thought.

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[27] G. Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*. (London: 1994), p. 163.

[28] As in the case of Apollonius of Tyana, who was deemed a holy man and produced miracles with the same greatness of those the Christians claimed that Christ did. See: K. Seligmann, *The History of Magic*. (Ner York: 1948), pp.87-8.

[29] W. C. Wright (transl.) *The Works of Emperor Julian, v.I.* (London: 1961).

[30] "External" in the sense of not belonging to the axis Greek's – Egyptian's symbolic referential symbolic universes.

[31] *Op.cit*, p. 68.

[32] See: G. Fowden, *op. cit*, pp. 36-7; and B. A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*. (Minneapolis: 1990).

4.1 Iamblichus of Chalcis as a Hermetist

In his work *De Mysteriis Aegyptorum*[33], written between late third century and early 4th century A.D, the Syrian Neo-Platonist/Neo-Pythagorean Iamblichus established a particular conception of magic by which the human soul could achieve salvation through rituals aimed at contact with gods. Iamblichus based his explanation on the divine aspect of his so-called theurgy (lit. the work of gods, normally translated as a synonym for magical practices) in the hermetical principle of Man's dual nature.

As a result, his perception of the occult arts connected them as a complementary mechanism which aimed for the perfection of souls. Using Egypt as a reference for his system, Iamblichus followed the idea that Hermetism did parallel many aspects of Egyptian tradition, reproducing some degree of "Egyptomania" that existed in the Graeco-Roman mentality.

a) On Theurgy

In his work, Iamblichus reproduced the old *formula* of claiming an Egyptian priest (Abammon) for the authorship of his work.[34] In fact, this tendency to relate Egypt to occult and fantastic wisdom remained a part of late Graeco-Roman imagery. In this sense, Hermetic occultism and philosophical principles were commonly portrayed as having had Egyptian origins. Iamblichus nonetheless made it clear that theurgy was a distinct and sacred process.

> Si donc l'ascension obtenue par les invocations procure aux prêtres purification des passions, affranchissement du monde créé, union au principe divin, comment dire qu'elle implique une passibillité? Car il n'est pas vrai que cette sorte d'invocation attire de force les dieux impassibles et purs vers le passible et l'impur ; au contraire, elle fait de nous, qui en raison de la génération sommes nés passibles, des êtres purs et immuables. (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* I, 12).

Indeed, theurgy was magic. The difference pointed out by Iamblichus was based on the premise that magic was essentially egotistically motivated, for it served human passions: desires, fears, ambitions, etc. On the other hand, the major objective of Theurgy was the spiritual improvement.[35] In that sense, Theurgy was the proposal of a "moral code" with regards to handling magic rather than an entirely new branch of magic.

> Le bien en soi, ils (les Égyptiens) croient que c'est, s'il divin, le dieu qui transcende la pensée ; s'il est humain, l'union à ce dieu, comme Bitys[36] l'a traduit des livres hermétiques. Cette partie n'a donc pas été, comme tu le supposes, "négligée par les Égyptien", mais divinement transmise; et ce n'est pas d'"objects futiles que les théurges accablent l'intellect divin", mais de ce qui se rapporte à la purification de l'âme [...]. (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* X, 7).

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[33] This title is an invention of Marcilio Ficino.

[34] Cf. the headlines of *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum.*

[35] See: G. Luch "Theurgy and Forms of Worship." In: J. Neusner *et alii*, *Religion, Science and Magic*. (Oxford: 1989), pp. 185-228. See also G. Shaw, Theurgy and the Soul: The Neo-Platonism of Iamblichus. (Pennsylvania: 1995).

[36] The Egyptian priest and Hermetist Bitys is presented by Iamblichus as being responsible for presenting King Ammon with the Hermetic texts (*De Myst*. VIII, 5). Fowden, *op.cit*, p. 150, n.34, believes that the frequent references to a certain Pitys in PGM IV might be a reference to him.

Deeply influenced by Hermetic texts, Iamblichus, - writing through his pseudonym Abammonis - tried to establish a correlation between Hermetica and Egyptian tradition. According to Iamblichus's explanation, the choice of Philosophy as the way to produce Hermetic literature would have been a consequence of the translation's process from Egyptian to Greek.

> Ceux (écrits) qui circulent sous le nom d'Hermès contiennent des opinions hermétiques, bien que souvent ils s'expriment dans la langue des philosophes; car ils on été traduits de l'égyptien par des hommes qui n'étaient pas sans connaître la philosophie. (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* VIII, 4).

In this sense, he defended the importance of the original Egyptian names in a magical perspective:

> Chaque peuple a des caractéristiques impossibles à transposer dans la langue d'un autre ; ensuite, même si on peut traduire ces noms, en tous cas ils ne gardent plus la même puissance ; de plus, les noms barbares ont à la fois beaucoup de solennité et beaucoup de concision, ils ont moins d'ambiguïté, de variété, et les mots qui les expriment sont moins nombreux ; pour toutes ces raisons ils s'accordent aux êtres supérieurs." (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* VII, 5).

His opinion on this subject seems to be supported by Asclepios' teachings to King Ammon in *Corpus Hermeticum*:

> The very quality of the speech and the <sound> of Egyptian words have in themselves the energy of objects they speak of. (CH. XVI, 1).

This passage is also subject of debate in the second chapter of this study, but in a different context of argumentation. However, Iamblichus had a different interpretation of this same passage and used it to support the idea that Egyptian sounds should be preserved in order to preserve their magical virtues. His interpretations may be a consequence of two different dimensions of ideologic appropriation:

First, an unpredictable and expontaneous cultural dialogue with the source. For Iamblichus it would be culturally unfathomable to consider any kind of criticism of the efficiency of philosophy as a system of intellectual digression/instruction. It was part of all Hellenized symbolic systems that the 'truth' was that philosophy was the only civilized way of intellectual expression. Therefore Iamblichus and his other Hellenistic contemporaries would be 'symbolically blind' to any such possibility. Another possibility is a subordination of the text to its receptor's social-political expectations: Iamblichus could not accept the possibility of Hermetic criticism of philosophy since he was proposing a philosophic system. Since he consistently based a part of his system on "translated Egyptian tradition", it would be illogical to promote an interpretation in which his main source of symbolic legitimacy disagreed with his ideas regarding the efficacy of philosophy.

What is exposed in Iamblichus' "The Mysteriis" is that Egyptian sounds were believed to have had magical virtues, and therefore, they should be "symbolically preserved" at least as *voces magicae*. Indeed, the so-called Greek Magical Papyri have

plenty of examples of how Greek spells recurred to the expedient of *voces magicae*[37] in order to transcribe Egyptian Demotic sacred names, and fulfil evocations.

> Charm that produces a direct vision: Prayer for divine alliance, which you are to say first toward the sunrise, then the same first prayer is to be spoken to a lamp. [...] Hymn: Hail, serpent, and stout lion, natural sorces of fire./ And hail, clear water and lofty-leafed tree,/ and you who gather up clover from golden fields of beans, and who cause gentle foam to gush forth from pure mouths. [...] I pray because your mystic symbols I declare, ηω αι ου αμερρ οουωθ . τυϊωη . Μαρμαραυώθ . Λαϊλαμ . σουμαρτα . Be gracious unto me, first-father, and may you yourself sent strength as my companion. [...]. (PGM. IV, 930-949).[38]

Note that in the Hermetic tractate *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, voces magicae* are also evoked twice by Tat in his calling for the angels of the eighth and ninth spheres:

> He is perfect, the invisible God to whom one speaks in silence – his image is moved when it is directed, and it governs – the one mighty power, who is exalted above majesty, who is better than honoured (ones), Ζοχαθαζο Α ΩΩ ΕΕ ΩΩΩ ΗΗΗ ΩΩΩΩ ΗΗ ΩΩΩΩΩΩ ΟΟΟΟΟ ΩΩΩΩΩΩ ΥΥΥΥΥ ΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩ ΩΩΩ Ζοζαζοθ . (NHH. VI-6, 56,10-20).[39]

And in his calling for God's hidden name:

> I praise you . I call your name that is hidden within me: Α Ω ΕΕ ΩΩ ΗΗΗ ΩΩΩ ΙΙΙΙ ΩΩΩΩ ΟΟΟΟΟ ΩΩΩΩΩ ΥΥΥΥΥΥ ΩΩΩΩΩΩ ΩΩΩΩΩΩΩ ΩΩΩΩΩΩΩΩ. (NHH. VI-6, 61, 4-10).

In fact, the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri reveals many similarities with theurgy as well as with technical contents of Hermetic discourses. They can be understood as the products of the same intercultural phenomenon. In a general analysis of Magic in Graeco-Roman Egypt, Pinch declares:

> [...] most of the techniques featured in the spells find precedents in earlier Egyptian Magic. These include identification with and threats against deities, the use of the dead as intermediaries, the making of magical figurines and protective amulets, and the drawning of divine figures and the invocation of deities by their sacred names.[40]

Iamblichus also attacked Christian's view on magic, acusing Christians of impiety for denying the divine principles supporting theurgy:[41]

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[37] It is the transcription and glossing alphabetically secret magic names. For a study on Greek and Demotic Magical Papyri, see: J. Dieleman. *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*. (Leiden/Boston: 2005).

[38] H.D. Betz (ed.). *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*. (Chicago, London: 2004), pp.56-7. Betz (p. 56, n.126) identifies this spell as a Greek equivalent to the Demotic spell called: *pḥ-nṯr* (god's arrival).

[39] The names Ζοχαθαζο and Ζοζαζοθ can also be found in PGM XIII 138, 213. Zoxathaz can be a combination of Life (ζωή) and Death (θάνατος). See: J. Holzhausen, *op.cit*, p. 521, n.57. Holzhausen observes connection of the seven Greek vocals with their seven known planets. See: J. –P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte, I.* (Québec: 1978), p.73.

[40] *op.cit*, p. 163.

[41] As in the attacks of Augustin in *City of God* X, 9-11. Augustin condemned all kinds of magic and classified incantantions, charms, necromancy (*goetia*) and theurgy as demonolatry. He addressed these chapters against Platonists like Porphyry who insisted in the divine aspects of theurgy.

> Et ceux par lesquels certains ridiculisent comme vagabonds et charlatans les fidèles des dieux, [...] ceux-là non plus n'atteignent pas la vraie théologie et la vraie théurgie. (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* X, 3).

His theurgy proposed a way to form a relationship with magic. From this perspective, the use of magic was acceptable and necessary in the process of learning about God.

b) *On Astrology*

Astrology in Graeco-Roman age was a mixing of Greek, Egyptian and Mesopotamian lores.[42] Some stars and constellations were preeminent in Egypt religious tradition, but the twelve signs of zodiac are a Greek invention. It was based on the theory that the energy of stars and planets were connected to certain precious stones and metals, and parts of the human body as well. Astrology was a popular phenomenon in Graeco-Roman world. Emperors had "Egyptian astrologers" at their service.[43] Astrologers had such social prestige that even the New Testament[44] included a scene of young Jesus receiving a visit of three eastern wise men/mages[45] guided by a mighty star.

> When they heard the king. They departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood where the young Child was. (Mt. II, 9).

Iamblichus` definition and justification of astrology is deeply connected to the Hermetic principle of Man's duality.[46] A spiritual being who descended to Earth with God's blessings in order to learn about Him and to help rule the creation. In that sense, Man was restricted by the cosmic forces ruling the material world. The seven spheres or astral gods who governed the Material world in obedience to Fate had *de facto* influences over men as long as they remained in their jurisdiction. Thus, while Theurgy helped Man in his transcendence to the gods, Astrology helped him to understand and control[47] his relations with Fate.[48] He explained that Astrology was just one of the many topics of the Hermetic doctrine:

> Les ephemerides astrologiques ne contiennent qu'une petite partie du systhème d'Hermès (τῶν ἑρμαϊκῶν διατάξεων). (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* VIII, 4).

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[42] For a complete analysis of the development of Astronomy in a comparative approach on Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians including Indian and Hellenistic sources, see: B. L. van der Waerden, *Anfänge der Astronomie* (Groningen: 1956). For a study on Egyptian astrology and the Graeco-Roman milieu, see: J. Dieleman, "Claiming the Stars – Egyptian Priests Facing the Sky." In: S. Bickel, A. Loprieno (eds.) AH 17 (Basel: 2003), pp. 277-289. See also: O. Neugebauer, R. A. Parker, *Egyptian astronomical Texts 3vols.* (London: 1969).

[43] See: G. Pinch, *op.cit,* p. 169, and J. Dieleman, AH 17, p. 277-89.

[44] Matthew II, 1-13.

[45] That depends of the translation. "Wise men" in English, like "Weisen" in German. "Mages" in French, "magos" in Spanish and Portuguese, "μάγοι" in Greek.

[46] As exposed in CH. I, 15, and already explained in the second chapter of this study.

[47] "Control" in the sense of not being reduced to a passive beholder of Fate's actions. For a well trained astrologer it was possible to change one's fate through foreknowledge.

[48] The Hermetic relation with Fate is explained in chapter 2.2.1, II-b of this study.

By analysing the Egyptian thought he established that it was a characteristic of Egyptians to differentiate between the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of life:

> Ils (les Égyptiens) distinguent de la nature la vie psychique et la vie intellectuelle, non seulement à propos de l'univers mais dans notre cas: mettant au-dessus intelect et raison comme étant à part soi, ils leur font oevrer les êtres du devenir; [...]. (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* VIII, 4).

As in the Hermetic doctrine, Man also has a dual Logos[49], which could be used as intellectual virtue, in order to prosper over the material world and as spiritual virtue, in order to assure him of the possibility of transcending back to God's side. Concerning the Hermetic Astrology, Iamblichus observed that the dual nature of Man leaves him under the rule of Fate as long as he lived in his material form.

> La plupart des Égyptiens font dépendre notre libre arbiter du movement des asters."Ce qu'il en est, il faut te l'expliquer plus longuement, en recourant aux conceptions hermétiques. D'après ces écrits, l'homme a deux âmes : l'une issue du Premier Intelligible, qui participe aussi à la puissance du démiurge ; l'autre introduite en nous à partir de la révolution des corps célestes; c'est en celle-ci que se glisse l'âme qui voit Dieu. (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* VIII, 6).

In that sense, Iamblichus proposed that in order to free oneself of Fate, it was necessary to become divine, by seeking God and avoiding all evildoings. That process demanded a dual effort. One side was the moral/spiritual purification...

> Je pronounce donc que l'homme conçu comme divinise, uni auparavant à la contemplation des dieux, s'est glissé dans une âme combinée à la forme spéecifiquement humaine et par là trouvé pris aux liens de la nécessité et de la fatalité. Il faut donc examiner comment il se délie et sáffranchit de ces liens. Or, il n'est pas d'autre moyen que la connaissance des dieux : l'essence du bonheur, en effect, c'est d'avoir la science du bien, comme l'essence du mal consiste dans l'oubli du bien et l'illusion au sujet du mal ; [...]." (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* X, 5).

... and the other side was intellectual, through the magical development of channels to the gods. Iamblichus explained that the union with the gods, or theurgy produced the spiritual purification and allowed man to triumph over Fate:

> La connaissance des dieux s'accompagne du retour à nous-mêmes et de la connaissance de notre âme. [...] Chez les dieux, la vérité ne subsiste-t-elle pas ennson essence et non sellon un accord, fondéee qu'elle est sur les intelligibles ? (*De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* X, 1-2).

Thus, astrology was a method of combining the intellectual and spiritual aptitudes (the double-essential Hermetic Logos), which composed human nature. Iamblichus claimed that – in agreement with his contemporaries' general knowledge on this subject – that it was a part of Egypt's tradition. His perception was that as-

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[49] The Hermetic Logos and its duality are explained in CH. XII, 14. With regards to the transcendence of Man due to his Nous, it is the subject of CH. XII,1. See also tables 10 a/b of this study.

trology aimed to predict or influence human affairs by understanding how the divine will operated through Fate. This understanding was a demonstration of how one's intellect could help one's soul in the task of self-purification.

4.2 Sabians and their fusion of Hermetica

Sabians are normally identified as Persians, Zoroastrians and Eastern Chaldeans, while their religion is portrayed as a star-worshiping cult. According to Assmann, some Gnostic sects from the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D could also fit in the definition of Sabian. At the end of the 4th century A.D, the Syrian city of Harran[50] was still pagan and its population remained following the Mesopotamian Moon god "Sin".[51]

 According to Drijvers[52], soteriology, cosmology, anthropology and theology of Bar Daysan of Edessa[53] (154 - 222 A.D) are consistent with the Hermetic worldview as expressed in the Poimandres. Despite this, Harranian beliefs were not exclusively derived from Hermetic sources as other influences were also present. In Haran, Hermetism had been syncronized with late Neo-Platonism which was prior to the rise of Islam.[54] In the 7th century A.D, this late Hellenistic Hermetism submitted to the invading Muslim forces. According to Holmyard,

> Syrian pagans from Harran were [...] star-worshippers and diligent astrologers. These Sabians, as the Arabs called them, possessed exceptional skills as linguists, and the ease with which they acquired Arabic recommended them to the courts at Baghdad [...].[55]

By the time of the Muslim conquest, Babylonian, Assyrian, Jewish, Greek, Graeco-Egyptian and Roman religion as well as Syriac Christianity had interpreted Harranian religion which was rooted in the worship of the stars and raised astrology to the level of a religion. According to Green,

> Sabian, then, is a synonym for gnostic. Given this definition, the stories found in certain Muslim authors connecting Sabian beliefs with those of the Egyptians, the references to Hermes, Enos, Seth and the Agathodaimon, the supposed pilgrimages of Sabians to the pyramids and the secret rituals and prayers would all make sense in the context of this definition of Sabian.[56]

However, from 830 A.D on, the term was used specifically to refer to Harran. According to Scott, they claimed to be Sabians in order to escape persecution[57], and de-

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[50] In the vicinities of Edessa, in modern Turkey.

[51] J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*. (London: 1997), p.57.

[52] H. J. W. "Bardaisan of Edessa and the Hermetica: The Aramaic Philosopher and the Philosophy of his time", in: JEOL, 21, 1970, pp.190-210.

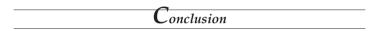[53] *Ibidem.* Bar Daysan of Edessa was one of the most important links in the chain of transmission of Hermetism to the Near East.

[54] See: T. M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran*. (Leiden: 1992), p.168.

[55] E. J. Holmyard, *Alchemy,* (Dover, New York: 1990), p.68.

[56] *Ibidem*, p.110.

[57] For the Koran (2: 59; 5:73; 22:17) proclaimed that Jews, Christians and Sabians were believers and therefore are protected by the Law. However, regardless of this, they were obligated to convert in 1050 A.D.

clared that the Hermetic books were their sacred writings.[58] Hermetism persisted as a living tradition in the city of Haran in Syria as late as the tenth century, when its leading exponent, Thabit ibn Qurra (835-901A.D), established a pagan Hermetic school in Baghdad.[59] Prominent Muslim philosophers as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and others were influenced by Hellenistic Hermetic writings.[60] Therefore, cases like the pagan-Gnostic tradition of Harran and the so-called Technical Hermetica were, in fact, Philosophical. Furthermore, such perceptions were assimilated and reproduced by the Islamic thought, following a radically opposite view of the Hermetic phenomenon that was developed by Christians.

Conclusion

In late antiquity, different social groups representing different thoughts and ideologies were in constant dispute while they imposed and defended their respective ways of life. Christians struggled to conquer new adepts by destroying the credibility of Paganism. The others struggled to maintain the strength of their symbolic universes, and attacked Christian's aspirations of hegemony over the Roman Empire. In this context, the intellectual debate promoting the codification of the Christian doctrine was also a method of criticizing all rival doctrines. In this sense, the meaning of a text is not merely found inside it, but is also built through an active social process, since it is ideological. The texts can be used in an "ideological" sense, since social discourses promote identities, exclusions, orientations and behaviours. What determines the ideological or political usage of a social discourse is the external context of the social process in which it is inserted.

As social groups, Christians, Pagans and Gnostics used a vast supply of literature in order to offer justification and legitimacy to their beliefs and behaviours, the Hermetic literature was part of this process. There was not a canonical interpretation, nor a "right way" of using the Hermetic texts, since the uses are culturally established by different social groups. They could be used equally as part of a theological discourse, philosophical debate, and erudite curiosity. In fact, the "usage" of Hermetic texts was by no means restrained to "Hermetic esoteric-like circles" – if one existed. Christian Gnostics used them in Nag Hammadi, Christian apologists assimilated them in their discourses and Pagan Philosophers debated them and used them as premises in their own systems. Therefore, each social group had different interests, strategies, and interpretations of the Hermetica. Furthermore, at one time these interpretations could be contradictory among the groups. Consequently, the difference of interpretations produced different "truths" concerning the Hermetica. Each "truth" was reproduced as part of the respective social group's symbolic universe.

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[58] W. Scott (ed., Transl.) *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus.* (Oxford: 1929), pp. 97-108.
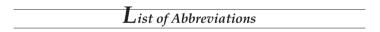
[59] See: A. E. Affifi, "The Influence of Hermetic Literature on Moslem Thought." In: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13/4, (Cambridge: 1951), p. 844, and D. Merkur, *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions.* (New York: 1991), p. 20-1. W. Scott, *op.cit*, pp. 103-5 mentions a book from ibn Qurra called *De Religionen Sabianorum.*

[60] See: A. E. Affifi, *op.cit.*, and Ch. Genequand, "Platonism and Hermetism in al-Kindi's *Fi al-Nafs.*" In: *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 4 (Frankfurt: 1987-8), pp.1-18.

Then, there was a Christian, a Pagan, and a Gnostic general view of the same phenomenon, and each one's interpretation could be used as part of the argument to support one's group, or as a tool to use against the other groups.

In that sense, it is possible to understand how the Christian view of Hermetism focused positively more on its theological/philosophical aspects. Christian theology claimed that only Christians could perform true magic – called miracles – for they were instruments of the only true God. Following this logic, all pagan magicians were dealing with demons. Then, the process of assimilating the Hermetica to the Christian symbolic universe also created a distinction between 'good' Hermetica (philosophical/theological contents) *and* 'bad' Hermetica (all contents encouraging occult/magic/esoteric individual practices). Therefore, when Christians performed their ideological separation of Hermetica, they were actually reproducing their judgement on Egyptian pagan tradition – for the general agreement depicted the Hermetica as Egyptian – and in another perspective, reproducing the Christian judgement of the entire non-Christian social reality. On the other hand, magic was part of the quotidian life not only in Egypt but in all pagan societies of antiquity as well; its practice was also an important part of all cults to the gods across pagan societies.

It would make no sense at all if the pagans' approach on the Hermetica had promoted any distinction between magical *and* theological contents in the Hermetica. As they understood it, Hermetism, theurgy, astrology (and even alchemy), were the connections between magical and theological contents of the doctrine. Such perception was indeed later assimilated by Islamic thought. The Hermetica became part of the Graeco-Roman society, and helped to shape its mentality. They were also useful instruments of mediation in the process of forming opinions under different social-political ideologies. The Hermetica are a social discourse as long as they help to legitimate lore, and produce a *consensus* - thus, a common sense - and support ideologies.

*L*ist of Abbreviations

AH – *Agyptologica Helvetica* (Basel).

CH – *Corpus Hermeticum*. English version: B. P. Copenhaver (transl.), Hermetica. (Cambridge: 2002); Greek Version: A.D. Nock, A. –J. Festugière (ed. and transl.) Corpus Hermeticum: Tomes I, II - Traités I-XVIII, (Paris: 1945).

JEOL – Jaarbericht ex Oriente Lux (Leiden).

NHH – *Nag Hammadi Hermetica*: Codex VI-6 (The Discourse on the Eight and Ninth), VI-7 (The Prayer of Thanksgiving), VI-8 (Asclepius: Coptic version from chapters 21 to 28). Translated from Coptic by J. Brashler, P. A. Dirkse and D. M. Parrot. In: J. M. Robert (ed.) The Nag Hammadi Library in English. (New York: 1990). Coptic version (fragmentary): J. Holzhausen, Das Corpus Hermeticum-Deutsch II. (Stuttgart, Bad Cannstatt: 1997).

PGM – *Papyri Graecae Magicae* – English version: H. D. Betz (ed.) The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation. (Chicago, London: 2004). Greek version: K. Preisendanz, Papyri Graecae Magicae, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: 1973-4).

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