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## GNOSIS

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

TO UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF *gnosis* IN THE HISTORY OF Western esotericism, we must begin by detaching it from a too close and exclusive association with Gnosticism. *Gnosis* is Greek for “knowledge,” and in the Hellenistic milieu of Late Antiquity, it was understood more specifically as a special kind of salvific knowledge by which the soul could be liberated from its material entanglement and regain its unity with the divine Mind.<sup>1</sup> The search for such salvation was by no means limited to gnostics; rather, it seems to have been the central preoccupation of a kind of “trans-confessional” cultic milieu that flourished particularly in Egypt, and whose adherents – whether they were pagans, Jews, or Christians – all interpreted (Middle) Platonic metaphysics in such a way as to transform it into religious worldviews with their own mythologies and ritual practices. This does not mean, however, that they themselves considered their religious beliefs as something new: On the contrary, the common assumption in this period was that the oldest was always best, and therefore the most ancient sages had been closest to divine truth.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, even Plato himself was not supposed to have been an original thinker, but merely an important link in the chain of transmission of the ancient and universal spiritual wisdom, the origins of which could be traced back to the most ancient “barbarian” peoples of the Orient and their legendary sages: notably Hermes Trismegistus in Egypt and Zoroaster in Persia. To distinguish such perspectives from strictly

<sup>1</sup> Note that it would be artificial to consider the noun *gnosis* in isolation: It belongs to a complex semantic field consisting of several related families of words concerned with perception, cognition and intuition. See Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur J. Droge, *Homer or Moses: Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989), 9 and *passim*.

philosophical Platonism, they will be referred to here as “Platonic Orientalism.”<sup>3</sup>

Scholars have long tended to discuss this entire milieu in rather denigrating terms as an “underworld” of Platonism, a “murky area” full of “sub-philosophical phenomena,”<sup>4</sup> although we are clearly dealing with religious phenomena that should not be judged by the yardstick of philosophical rationalism but deserve to be taken seriously on their own terms. Traditional prejudices in this regard have slowly begun to vanish in recent scholarship, but what still remains is a tendency to focus more or less exclusively on philosophical and doctrinal matters while downplaying or ignoring the fact that when it comes to grasping the true mysteries of divinity, the sources never cease to emphasize the total inadequacy of discursive language.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely this point that is crucial to understanding what *gnosis* is all about. It implies that theoretical discussions about such matters as cosmogony, anthropology or eschatology, no matter how much space may be devoted to them or how interesting they may be to modern scholars, were considered of strictly secondary importance. As formulated in the Hermetic writings, reasoned discourse (*logos*) simply “does not lead as far as the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

It follows that one should not expect the relevant sources to describe the contents of *gnosis*: At most, they contain stammering expressions of amazement and awe about a range of spiritual experiences that defy verbalization and can only be hinted at by very inadequate analogies. Rather than direct descriptions of *gnosis*, we find idealized narratives of how it has been attained by exemplary seekers such as Hermes Trismegistus and his pupil Tat. These figures are depicted as going through a series of ecstatic or “altered” states, which allow them to perceive progressively more exalted dimensions of reality beyond what is accessible to the five senses.<sup>7</sup> The direct perception of such spiritual dimensions, by means of “higher senses” equivalent but not identical to bodily hearing and sight, is what *gnosis* was all about. The

<sup>3</sup> Coined by John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), the term “Platonic Orientalism” makes explicit what was implied already by André-Jean Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1950), 19–44.

<sup>4</sup> John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 384; and cf. Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnosis in the Hermetica,” *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008), 128–163; 129–130, and *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> C.H. IX: 10.

<sup>7</sup> See detailed analysis in Hanegraaff, “Altered States.”

knowledge attained in this manner was salvific for at least three reasons. First, it is described as freely given from above, as a divine reward from the “realms of light” in response to the pupil’s persistent efforts at transcending the realm of the senses and the human passions. Second, it claims to provide direct and irrefutable evidence not only that those realms of light really exist but also that it is possible for the pupil to enter them as his true home. They are no longer something to believe in blindly, or merely speculate and talk about: The pupil *knows*, for he has now seen and heard them himself. Third, the light of the divine realms is believed to be identical to the seeker’s own essential nature; hence, the process of return means a radical end to alienation from one’s own divine essence. It is not just that the seeker returns to the spiritual light from whence he has come, but he discovers that he *is* that light. This idea of “self knowledge as knowledge of God” is often conveyed by the image of a “divine spark” that has been trapped in matter and is now liberated from it and reunited with its source, but it is important to realize that that is just one possible conceptualization. For example, in the Hermetic *Poimandres*, the same point is made in an entirely different manner, by the dramatic image of the visionary looking for a long time into Poimandres’s eyes and realizing that he is looking at himself: divine light looking at divine light.<sup>8</sup>

The Hermetic writings may be seen as paradigmatic of what *gnosis* must have meant in its original late Hellenistic context, but the term and its meaning came to be separated from each other in the later history of Western esotericism. The possibility of gaining direct access to the realms of light by means of ecstatic states was inherent in Platonic Orientalism; therefore, one should not be surprised to see it return in later developments of the same tradition, such as notably the Islamic esotericism of Suhrawardī:

That there are dominating lights, that the Creator of all is a light, that the archetypes are among the dominating lights – the pure souls have often beheld this to be so when they have detached themselves from their bodily temples. . . . Whoso questions the truth of this . . . let him engage in mystical disciplines and service to those visionaries, that perchance he will, as one dazzled by the thunderbolt, see the light blazing in the Kingdom of Power and will witness the heavenly essences and lights that Hermes and Plato beheld.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> C.H. I: 7–8; and see analysis in Hanegraaff, “Altered States,” 139–140.

<sup>9</sup> Suhrawardī, *Hikmat al-ishrāq* II.2.165–166, trans. according to Suhrawardī, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, ed. and trans. by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1999), 107–108.

In the Latin West, this tradition was eclipsed for many centuries. The Platonic and Hermetic writings known to the Middle Ages were mainly concerned with philosophical and cosmological problems; even the revival of Platonism (more precisely, of Platonic Orientalism) since the fifteenth century did not initially lead to anything resembling a rehabilitation of *gnosis*. The term was associated much too strongly with the gnostic heresies to be eligible as a positive category, and it is important to realize that in his epochal translation of *Corpus Hermeticum* I–XIV, Marsilio Ficino completely overlooked the special connotations of *gnosis* (translated as *cognitio*) and its cognates.<sup>10</sup> The term and its connotations simply did not register on the screen of Renaissance Platonism and Hermetism.

Nevertheless, it would have been strange if the humanists who were so busy studying and translating the entire referential corpus of Platonic Orientalism – the Hermetica, the *Chaldaean Oracles* (attributed to Zoroaster since George Gemistus Plethon), and a variety of Middle-Platonic and especially Neoplatonic writings – had remained entirely oblivious to its message of salvation. And indeed, although the term *gnosis* is never used, the kind of suprarational ecstatic knowledge to which it refers did become an important theme. One can see this already in the work of Ficino's contemporary Lodovico Lazzarelli, who translated the final three treatises of the *Corpus* and seems to have understood its basic message far better than the great Ficino: For Lazzarelli, the Hermetica were all about attaining salvific knowledge of one's own divine nature and origin by means of an ecstatic ascent back to the realm of light.<sup>11</sup> As for Ficino, his primary reference for the same idea seems to have been not the *Corpus Hermeticum* but Plato's *Phaedrus*, with its description of four divine "frenzies" (*furores*) that allow the famous "chariot of the soul" to make its ascent back to the divine.<sup>12</sup> In various later Renaissance thinkers, one can observe how Hermetic religiosity and the Platonic frenzies were associated to a point of virtual identity.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore reasonable to conclude that in this tradition of "ecstatic religion" on

<sup>10</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "How Hermetic Was Renaissance Hermetism? Reason and Gnosis from Ficino to Foix de Candale," in *Hermetism and Rationality*, ed. Jan Veenstra (Louvain: Peeters, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> See Lazzarelli's *Crater Hermetis*, in Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Ruud M. Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino," in *Myths, Martyrs and Modernity*, ed. Jitse Dijkstra, Justin Kroesen, and Yme Kuiper (Brill: Leiden, 2009), 553–567.

<sup>13</sup> On du Preau and Foix-Candale, see Hanegraaff, "How Hermetic Was Renaissance Hermetism?"; on Agrippa, see Hanegraaff, "Better than Magic: Cornelius Agrippa and Lazzarellian Hermetism," *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 4:1 (2009), 1–25.

Platonic-Hermetic foundations, the Late Antiquity tradition of *gnosis* survived incognito.

Due to the wholly negative image of Gnosticism, it was to be expected that connections between Renaissance Platonism-Hermetism and the dualistic heresies of the first centuries would be drawn not by the defenders of the *prisca theologia* but by its critics. During the second half of the sixteenth century, largely under the impact of the witchcraft debate, various forms of anti-Platonism, and Protestant attacks on Roman Catholicism, it became increasingly common for polemicists to imagine historical “lineages of darkness” from Oriental barbarism (Egypt, Persia, Babylonia) to Pythagoras, Plato and Platonism, and from there to Gnosticism.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, this perspective gave rise to full-blown “histories of error” in which the spread of heresy was traced from its origins through the centuries, and up to the present. The culminating examples of this genre, known as “anti-apologeticism,”<sup>15</sup> were Ehregott Daniel Colberg’s *Platonisch-Hermetisches Christentum* (1690–1691), which presented contemporary currents such as Paracelsism, Rosicrucianism, and Christian theosophy as latter-day manifestations of the perennial Platonic-Hermetic enemy; and Jacob Brucker’s great *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (1742–1744), where it was described as the superstitious shadow of true philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, the virtual founder of the anti-apologetic genre, Jacob Thomasius, discussed the idea of *gnosis* much more explicitly than his successors: His pioneering *Schediasma Historicum* (1665) even carries the term in its full title.<sup>17</sup> For the Protestant Thomasius, *gnosis* was a core element of heresy, referring to the attempt (vain and illegitimate by definition, and closely linked to *curiositas*) to gain knowledge about divine realities by merely human means, independent of the biblical revelation. As such, he demarcated it from two other categories: the legitimate although limited knowledge gained by rational philosophy on the one hand, and the superior knowledge

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Johann Weyer, *De praestigiis Daemonum* (1563) II.3; Martin Del Rio, *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* (1599) I.3; Giovanni Battista Crispo, *De Platone caute legenda* (1594), Preface.

<sup>15</sup> That is to say, against the Patristic apologetic tradition: see Sicco Lehmann-Brauns, *Weisheit in der Weltgeschichte: Philosophiegeschichte zwischen Barock und Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> On Colberg, see Lehmann-Brauns, *Weisheit*, 223–265. On Brucker, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Western Esotericism in Enlightenment Historiography: The Importance of Jacob Brucker,” in *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*, ed. Andreas Kilcher (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Jacob Thomasius, *Schediasma Historicum, quo, Occasione Definitiones vetustae, quâ Philosophia dicitur ΓΝΩΣΙΣ ΤΩΝ ΟΝΤΩΝ, varia discutuntur ...* (Leipzig: Joh. Wittigau 1665); cf. Lehmann-Brauns, *Weisheit*, 21–111.

about divine things revealed by God and received by *pistis* (faith) on the other.<sup>18</sup> In Brucker, this triad corresponded with a distinction between (1) the true religion of biblical revelation, (2) the history of philosophy, and (3) the history of (crypto) pagan religion as the negative counterpart of both, containing essentially everything we nowadays study under the rubric of “Western esotericism.” As the history of philosophy established its identity as an independent discipline from the eighteenth century on, it did so by sharply excluding the third category, which became academically homeless for centuries.

In Thomasius’s analysis, the search for *gnosis* was highlighted as central to that third category, thus resulting in the suggestion of three essential “paths of knowledge”: reason, faith, and *gnosis*. With hindsight, it was only a question of time before authors critical of Enlightenment rationality and science, but unwilling to simply return to Christian orthodoxy, would therefore begin to see *gnosis* in a more positive light.<sup>19</sup> In most such cases, however, the term was used not in the specific sense of a special type of salvific knowledge, but as a general label for the various currents in Late Antiquity (including, but not limited to, Gnosticism) to which we have been referring as Platonic Orientalism. Thus, Jacques Matter, who seems to have invented the term “esotericism,” used Gnosticism and *gnosis* as synonyms and described them as “the introduction into Christianity of the cosmological and theosophical systems that had been the chief part of the ancient religions of the Orient.”<sup>20</sup> The great historian of Christianity Ferdinand Christian Baur built on Matter’s work and defined *gnosis* quite simply as philosophy of religion.<sup>21</sup> This was a smart move, which amounted to turning the third category of the anti-apologists (from Thomasius through Brucker) into a neutral one: The human attempt to investigate the divine mysteries was now presented not as punishable *hubris*, but as a legitimate pursuit that could be traced from the ancient gnostics through Jacob Boehme, culminating in Hegel’s system of idealism. That *gnosis* was turning into a positive category in the circles of

<sup>18</sup> See analysis in Lehmann-Brauns, *Weisheit*, 89–99.

<sup>19</sup> As pointed out by Antoine Faivre, the term begins to make its first “timid” appearance in the context of Western esotericism in the early nineteenth century. See Faivre, “Le terme et la notion de ‘gnose’ dans les courants ésotériques occidentaux modernes (Essai de périodisation),” in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi: Histoire des Religions, Approches contemporaines*, ed. Jean-Pierre Mahé and Paul-Hubert Poirier (Paris: Institut de France, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Matter, *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme, et de son influence sur les sectes religieuses et philosophiques des dix premiers siècles de l’ère chrétienne* (1828; 2nd ed., Strasbourg / Paris, 1843), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Die christliche Gnosis, oder die christliche Religions-Philosophie in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Tübingen, 1835), vii.

German idealists and admirers of Boehme is also demonstrated by the case of Franz van Baader, who presented “the true *gnosis*” as an alternative to linear causality in several of his essays.<sup>22</sup>

In the occultist milieu of the later nineteenth century, *gnosis* remained a general label for Platonic Orientalism, rather than for some special type of knowledge. Thus, in a chapter with the significant title “Christian Dogmas Derived from Heathen Philosophy,” Helena P. Blavatsky declared that although the gnostics were destroyed, “the *Gnosis*, based on the secret science of sciences . . . was never without its representatives in any age or country.”<sup>23</sup> Examples were, among many others, Zoroaster, Abraham, Henoch, Moses, the three Hermes Trismegisti, Pythagoras, Plato, Jesus, Philo, and the Kabbalah. Elsewhere, Blavatsky makes clear that for her *gnosis* is simply one of the synonyms of Theosophy.<sup>24</sup> In many later instances of the term in esoteric, occultist, or Traditionalist literature, from Blavatsky to the present, the pattern remains essentially the same: *Gnosis* stands quite generally for “the true wisdom” or “secret science” and its many representatives through the ages, who possessed a superior knowledge about the nature of reality and the divine.<sup>25</sup>

Parallel to the history of the term as such, the incognito survival of *gnosis* as ecstatic religion based on Platonic and Hermetic foundations did not cease with the Renaissance either. The notion of an “internal sense” by means of which the soul can perceive metaphysical realities beyond the realm of the normal senses continued in the *vernünftige Hermetik* of the late eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, closely connected to the search for a “higher reason” superior to Enlightenment rationality and a “higher knowledge” reaching beyond the domain of natural science.<sup>26</sup> That the appeal to *gnosis* could serve the agendas of the Enlightenment, remarkable though this might seem at first, may be illustrated here using the example of a rationalist paraphrase of the Old Testament published in 1735, where the snake tells Eve: “God knows that you will receive a great illumination when you eat

<sup>22</sup> See discussion in Faivre, “La terme et la notion.”

<sup>23</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (1877; reprinted Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1972), 38.

<sup>24</sup> H. P. Blavatsky, “What Is Theosophy?,” *The Theosophist* 1:1 (1879), 2–5.

<sup>25</sup> Many examples are discussed in Faivre, “La terme et la notion.”

<sup>26</sup> Rolf Christian Zimmermann, *Das Weltbild des jungen Goethe: Studien zur Hermetischen Tradition des Deutschen 18. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1969/1979), vol. 1, 11–43; Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, “‘Höhere Vernunft’ und ‘höheres Wissen’ als Leitbegriffe in der esoterischen Gesellschaftsbewegung: Vom Nachleben eines Renaissancekonzepts im Jahrhundert der Aufklärung,” in *Aufklärung und Esoterik*, ed. Neugebauer-Wölk (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1999), 170–210.



from this fruit: yes, you will receive a divine intellect and attain to a higher knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> While such a passage clearly served Enlightenment polemics against ecclesiastical dogmatism, criticized for trying to keep man ignorant, it implied a criticism of rationalist dogmatism as well: the limitations of the merely human intellect could be transcended in the attainment of a superior and divine knowledge. Thus, even though the term *gnosis* is not used here, we are dealing with yet another example of a positive reversal of Thomasius’s triad.

Just as in Late Antiquity, the attainment of higher knowledge as an alternative to strict rationalism and blind faith still appeared to require an altered state of consciousness. In the late eighteenth century and continuing through the nineteenth, the techniques discovered by Franz Anton Mesmer and his successors appeared to make it possible to induce conditions of artificial sleep, or trance, during which many so-called somnambules claimed spectacular visions of invisible spiritual realms and their inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> In the post-Kantian era, such experiences were often interpreted as proof that the categories of time, space, and causality could be transcended after all, making it possible to gain direct access to the noumenal realm of spirit: In such a manner, it was claimed, one could gain direct experiential knowledge of the metaphysical reality from whence the human soul had come and to which it would return.<sup>29</sup> In the same context, the implicit (and often explicit) polemics against Enlightenment could lead to fascinating mutations of the light versus darkness metaphor. Thus Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, a key author in this context, conceptualized the spiritual realms as the “Nightside of Nature”: Paradoxically, it was precisely in the dark realm of dream and sleep (often code words for mesmeric trance) that one could find the immediate spiritual illumination that was being obscured by the superficial daytime consciousness of the so-called Enlightenment.<sup>30</sup> And just as in the

<sup>27</sup> Johann Lorenz Schmidt, *Die göttlichen Schriften vor den Zeiten des Messie Jesus . . .* (Wertheim: J. G. Nehr, 1735), 13, quoted here according to Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Theodizee und Tatsachen: Das philosophische Profil der deutschen Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 88.

<sup>28</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Magnetic Gnosis: Somnambulism and the Quest for Absolute Knowledge,” in *Die Enzyklopädie der Esoterik: Allwissenheitsmythen und universalwissenschaftliche Modelle in der Esoterik der Neuzeit*, ed. Andreas Kilcher (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> For an excellent example of such implicit anti-Kantian polemics, see Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, *Theorie der Geister-Kunde, in einer Natur-, Vernunft- und Bibelmässigen Beantwortung der Frage: Was von Ahnungen, Gesichten und Geistererscheinungen geglaubt und nicht geglaubt werden müsse* (Nuremberg: Raw’schen Buchhandlung, 1808), 30–32 (§ 45–46).

<sup>30</sup> Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert, *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaft* (Dresden: Arnold, 1808) and *Die Symbolik des Traumes* (1814; facsimile edition Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1968).

context of Late Antiquity, the knowledge thus gained could not be adequately expressed in normal discursive language, such as that of science or philosophy. It could only be experienced directly or, at best, conveyed indirectly and quite vaguely by symbols and images, hieroglyphic “inner languages” of the soul, or numerical abstractions.<sup>31</sup>

As the mesmeric current developed into occultism, practitioners during the nineteenth century began to experiment with any possible technique, whether traditional or novel, by which normal, rational consciousness could be modified so as to gain access to the “higher world.” For example, one reads in the early occultist classic *Ghost Land* that trance states “could be induced some times by drugs, vapors, and aromal essences: sometimes by spells, as through music, intently staring into crystals, the eyes of snakes, running water, or other glittering substances; occasionally by intoxications caused by dancing, spinning around, or distracting clamors.”<sup>32</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, experimentation with occult techniques for changing one’s consciousness and thereby gaining higher knowledge had become interwoven in complex ways with the emergence of the new science of psychology, leading to a process of “psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology” that has continued up to the present day.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the various manifestations of Platonic Orientalism in Late Antiquity had become a major focus of scholarly research, particularly in the context of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (history of religion school); following a terminological convention that, as pointed out earlier, can be traced back at least to Ferdinand Christian Baur, that field as a whole was often referred to by the generic German label *die Gnosis*.

All these various developments – nineteenth-century occultism (including a strong concern with phallic and solar mythologies<sup>34</sup>), experimentation with altered states of consciousness; clinical psychology; and the scholarly study of Gnosticism, Hermetism, and other manifestations of the Platonic Orientalist

<sup>31</sup> Next to Schubert, a classic example is the famous “Seeress of Prevorst.” See analysis in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “A Woman Alone: The Beatification of Friederike Hauffe née Wanner (1801–1829),” in *Women and Miracle Stories*, ed. Anne-Marie Korte (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 211–247.

<sup>32</sup> *Ghost Land, or Researches into the Mysteries of Occultism illustrated in a Series of Autobiographical Sketches*, ed. and trans. Emma Hardinge Britten (1876; facs. repr. Pomeroy: Health Research, no date), 30; and cf. a similar passage on p. 67, which mentions, for example, “mephitic vapors, pungent essences, or narcotics.”

<sup>33</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 482–513.

<sup>34</sup> As demonstrated in Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

milieus of late antiquity – came together in the work of Carl Gustav Jung.<sup>35</sup> Jung's famous term "individuation" refers to an arduous process of self-discovery and psychological integration, through confrontation with the archetypal contents of one's personal as well as "collective" unconscious. With explicit reference to gnostic symbolism, it was described by him as an initiatic process ultimately aiming at unification with one's own divine self, or deification. In the wake of Jung's enormous influence in popular culture, particularly after World War II, his psychological interpretation of ancient Gnosticism (as well as alchemy, seen as a continuation of it<sup>36</sup>) has become certainly the most dominant influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century esoteric perceptions of *gnosis* as a special kind of "knowledge of the Self as knowledge of God." As an intuitive "knowledge of the heart," it is polemically juxtaposed (as in the days of Jacob Thomasius) against rational and scientific knowledge, as well as against the claims of religious orthodoxy.<sup>37</sup> In the wake of the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, this essentially Jungian discourse has developed into a significant current of New Age religion, in which newly discovered "sacred texts" such as the *Gospel of Thomas* are interpreted in a selective manner so as to give support to "neo-gnostic" holistic spiritualities.<sup>38</sup> To this, we might add the popularity of Traditionalist assumptions about *gnosis* as a core element of "true" spiritual wisdom, from René Guénon to Fritjof Schuon and their many contemporary sympathizers.<sup>39</sup> Although orthodox Traditionalists reject Jungianism and other forms of psychologized religion as just another modernist perversion, in the broader context of contemporary alternative religion the two perspectives are easily combined by enthusiasts of "inner traditions."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> On Jung's intellectual roots in contemporary philosophical, scientific, and esoteric culture, see Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> Robert Segal, "Jung's Fascination with Gnosticism," in *The Allure of Gnosticism*, ed. Segal (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 26–38, here 26.

<sup>37</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Reason, Faith, and Gnosis: Potentials and Problematics of a Typological Construct," in *Clashes of Knowledge: Orthodoxies and Heterodoxies in Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Meusberger et al. (New York: Springer, 2008), 133–144.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Smith, "The Revival of Ancient Gnosis," in *Allure of Gnosticism*, 204–223; and Dylan Burns, "Seeking Ancient Wisdom in the New Age: New Age and Neognostic Commentaries on the Gospel of Thomas," in *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*, ed. Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 253–289.

<sup>39</sup> See Faivre, "Le terme et la notion" (discussing, *inter alia*, Guénon's journal *La Gnose*, Schuon's *Sentiers de gnose*, and Jacob Needleman's collective volume *Sword of Gnosis*).

<sup>40</sup> I am referring to the kind of spiritual perspectives represented by a publisher such as Inner Traditions, or the popular journal *Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions* (1985–1999).

Finally, to an extent that may come as a surprise to some, the term *gnosis* has been reunited in contemporary esotericism with its original meaning of “ecstatic” ascent to, direct perception of, and unification with the higher realms of spiritual light. In countless cases, historians will have little trouble recognizing current New Age descriptions of those higher realms as latter-day variations or mutations of the Platonic hierarchies; although the phenomenon remains under-researched, countless groups and individuals today are deeply involved in a range of practices and techniques aimed at gaining experiential access to those invisible spiritual dimensions so as to unite themselves with their own “inner essence” and regain their original divinity.<sup>41</sup> It is easy for scholars to snicker about such aspirations, but although the relevant sources are obviously permeated by the characteristic low-brow jargon of pop science and psychology rather than the philosophical terminology of its ancient counterparts, it is hard to see why the salvific knowledge sought in these contexts should not qualify as *gnosis*.<sup>42</sup>

In closing, a final remark may be in order about the state of academic research on the topic of this essay. Entire libraries can be filled with learned studies of Gnosticism and Hermetism in Late Antiquity, their context in Hellenistic culture, and later historical developments in which their religious perspectives were continued in some manner, up to the present day. However, articles and books devoted specifically to *gnosis* as “knowledge” are virtually nonexistent. In a nutshell: many scholars have attempted to answer the question “what is Gnosticism?” – but answers to the question “what is *gnosis*?” are remarkably scarce. Obviously, this is not meant to deny that one will find at least some discussion of *gnosis* in most monographs on Gnosticism or Hermetism. But typically it is discussed there as merely one element among many others, and not necessarily an important one, especially if compared with the lengthy and detailed analyses of such dimensions as cosmic dualism, various elements of gnostic mythology such as the *heimarmenè*, the *demiurge*, the *archonts*, and so on.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For some examples from the New Age movement up to the early 1990s, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*.

<sup>42</sup> The essentialism of contemporary esotericists who would claim that ancient and modern *gnosis* are all one and the same universal spiritual phenomenon is neither more nor less problematic than the academic essentialism according to which ancient *gnosis* was the “real and authentic” article in comparison to which its contemporary parallels (as discussed, for example, by Burns, “Seeking Ancient Wisdom”) are just fake surrogates.

<sup>43</sup> For Gnosticism alone, see, for example, the classic studies by Hans Jonas, and important recent monographs such as Michael Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism:” An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) or Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). The

It is virtually unheard of in serious scholarly literature to see *gnosis* presented as the central core of these types of religion, in relation to which the other dimensions, although obviously important, would be of strictly secondary importance.<sup>44</sup> Admittedly, to pursue such an approach consistently would imply a kind of Copernican revolution in the study of gnostic, hermetic, and esoteric forms of religion, since it would promote *gnosis* from the status of a minor planet to that of the central sun in the religious cosmos under discussion. Radical though it may be, this is precisely what the present contribution would like to suggest.

former has precisely one reference to *gnosis* in the index, the latter none at all, although the term is in fact discussed in both works. Garth Fowden does have a special section on *gnosis* in *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 105–114.

<sup>44</sup> In sharp contrast, that Gnosticism is all about *gnosis* is the default assumption in much of the popular “spiritual” literature referred to earlier; and this is probably among the major reasons why academics have an instinctive aversion against such suggestions, or at most, pay lip-service to the centrality of *gnosis* without drawing the right conclusions.