



## 54. THE REFORMED PSEUDO-RELIGION AND ITS PSEUDO-ESOTERISM

Before addressing the theme proposed in the title, we will have to mention the problem of the relationship between the new humanistic science and religion. Already in Lull and Nicholas of Cusa we had found that knowledge had split into two opposing domains. Or rather, secular science had declared itself superior to faith. One was prerogative of a small intellectual elite, while faith was given to the people to satisfy its elementary needs in order to maintain both public and private peace<sup>1</sup>.



### 1. The scientist-magician

This science, as demonstrated in previous chapters, appeared increasingly mixed with magic to the point that it was not possible to distinguish their respective boundaries. On the other hand, magic, like profane science itself, is nothing more than an experimental knowledge addressed to the gross and subtle phenomena here considered as 'objective reality', and hence 'real'<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary, according to this point of view, religious faith would concern only hypotheses that cannot be demonstrated, beliefs, imaginations<sup>3</sup>. The scientific mentality spread by Humanism generated a new curiosity to search the skies with an unhealthy mixture of astrology and astronomy; to explore the emerged lands looking for both real and fantasy people and places<sup>4</sup>; to intervene in the composition of matter in order to analyze and modify it through physics, chemistry and alchemy.

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<sup>1</sup> Religion was thus reduced to a tolerated superstition for unrefined minds. This imposed on the new science scholars a methodical denigration of medieval theology and metaphysics (however partial the latter may have been) that coordinated the sciences of *trivium* and *quadrivium* and providing universal doctrinal bases. The science of the ancients was contemptuously defined as 'monastic', while the new science was characterized by secularism. It should be noted that even today this obtuse mentality lives on.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, this approach remains exclusively limited to the waking world (sskt. *jāgrat prapañca*) and does not include the knower-subject at all (sskt. *pramāṭr*).

<sup>3</sup> Obviously even secular science is based on hypotheses, imaginations, postulates and unprovable dogmas, meaning faith, like any other worldly knowledge (sskt. *vyāvahārika pramāṭṛtva*). But this arrogant attitude of superiority was enough to intimidate the representatives of the Church. Many of them, like the Cusano, supported this position against tradition. From that moment on, they have manifested two opposing tendencies: the first one supports the superiority of faith over knowledge. In this way, Patristic and Scholasticism were foolishly abandoned as subordinate to the truth affirmed by faith; in doing so, the superiority of secular science over faith was implicitly recognized and it paved the path to the attempt to find 'scientific' justifications for religious precepts as we had experienced in the last couple of centuries. The second tendency is to assume a blind hostility towards everything that is doctrinal, cognitive and intelligent, accusing wisdom of arrogance and 'Gnosticism'. These two tendencies though incompatible with each other, coexist in the callousness of the ecclesiastics.

<sup>4</sup> We will not address the topic of geographical discoveries, especially that of the Americas. However, since colonialism and missionary practice started during the Renaissance period, together with the fanciful historical falsification connected to it, we will return often on these controversial issues.



However misunderstood, the presence of an initiatic esoterism above and beyond the exterior religion was still in the memory of the Renaissance scholars. Esoterism, which had represented the true wisdom of the Middle Ages, had maintained order into the Church and the Empire and had provided the means for an inner realization to those who had the right qualifications. The tragic end of the Templars had marked the rapid decline of the initiatic schools of Western Europe, as each of them somehow referred back to the Templars' Order, leaving the Papacy and the Empire like two empty shells. Renaissance thinkers were aware of the decadence and corruption of the Church, and hence they turned towards the Empire, and especially to the national kingdoms, hoping for a renewal.



## 2. Allegory of the Renaissance King

Indeed, they mainly felt the lack of chivalric initiation and the cosmological knowledge that it entailed. However, their ideas about it were totally distorted.



## 3. Erasmus of Rotterdam

The renewal of exotericism tended towards a return to a presumed evangelical purity, which meant the total abrogation of tradition. It was an evangelical purity filtered through the humanistic lens that had already lost all traditional transmission. Two were the main aspects of this religious reform. The first tendency was a reform from within, represented by Erasmus of Rotterdam, that aimed to maintain the external form of the ecclesiastical structure. This modification had to occur according to moralistic parameters and without taking into account the stratification of traditional teaching accumulated over the centuries. The second trend was the reform from the outside against the Church, represented by Luther and his imitators, with the catastrophic consequences that we have previously described.

The renewal of esoterism, or rather its re-founding *ex novo*, led to a series of confused and very suspicious projects. Firstly, it was required the abrogation of the theology based on Aristotelianism. This already shows



the distorted ideas of the scholars and magicians of the Renaissance, in fact theological knowledge belongs in its entirety to the exoteric domain. Having lost all esoteric wisdom, they replaced it with the magic of Hermeticism and the Qabbalah, variously mixed among them, but always in a syncretic way. The fundamental problem of these Renaissance scholars was that although sensing the lack of initiation<sup>1</sup>, they no longer knew what it consisted of and what was its purpose. By opening to magic and witchcraft, they freed dangerous psychic influences that contributed to devastate Europeans minds further more.



#### 4. Agrippa during an evocation

The best example of this project to reform tradition without any spiritual transmission is represented by Enrico Cornelio Agrippa (1486-1535). He had been disciple of the very cautious Abbot Trithemius<sup>2</sup> and fellow disciple of Paracelsus<sup>3</sup>, and in the wake of Reuchlin he carried on a Qabbalah no longer Christian but solely Protestant. In an attempt to restore some order in Catholicism, in Italy began an anti-protestant sentiment. This tendency forced those humanists who drift towards paganism, to return into the Catholic ranks or, at least, to conceal their heretical ideas. As a sign of contempt Agrippa avoided as much as possible quoting Pico della Mirandola or Francesco Zorzi, referring preferably to his German Lutheran compatriots: Reuchlin, Dürer, Cranac, Johannes Frobenius and others. Together with his friend Albrecht Dürer, Agrippa put pressure on Erasmus to abjure Catholicism, but remained disgusted with the diplomatic responses of the Dutch philosopher. He was therefore a fundamentalist Protestant, who actually only reproduced without any originality the themes of Florentine Neo-Platonism of the previous generation.

Yates, in her studies of re-evaluation of Protestant occultism, describes him as a fine thinker of great culture, but she fails to bring any evidence in favour of this depiction of Agrippa<sup>4</sup>. What is unmistakable and what distinguishes him from Ficino, Pico and Zorzi is his evident aggressiveness and his faith in the magic, so openly declared in his writings. Despite his conversion to Protestantism, he was soon suspected of black magic and witchcraft<sup>5</sup>. Rumours spread that the black dog that accompanied him in

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<sup>1</sup> These self-satisfied intellectuals despised the craft initiations because they considered the mas vulgar and suitable for ignorant workers. However, in the European desolate initiatic desert, Agrippa was the first to launch a first and timid bait to the Free Masons, sometimes defining God as the Architect of the Universe.

<sup>2</sup> The Benedictine Johann Heidenberg Trithemius was the author of a confusing Steganography that allegedly allowed distant communication, even with angels, by using an abstruse alphabetical and numerical method. Because of his ambiguous religious positions, he was deposed by his own monks and had to withdraw in an isolated monastery.

<sup>3</sup> Doctor, alchemist and astrologer, Theophrastus Bombast from Hohenheim chose the pseudonym Paracelsus due to his admiration towards the Roman doctor Aulius Cornelius Celsus. The question erases whether the real Celsus he took inspiration from was in fact the homonymous Gnostic heretic philosopher, historically known for the terrible reprimands that Origen addressed against him in his *Contra Celsum*.

<sup>4</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979, 5th ch. Yates' work is indeed very useful for the material and data it discloses. However, with regard to a critical point of view, it is easy to rotate her judgment 180° in order to get the correct answers to any possible doubts, since this scholar is an expert in the so-called spirituality of Renaissance occultism.

<sup>5</sup> It is well known, that Protestants, because of their moralistic vision of human behaviour, were really obsessed with witchcraft much more than Catholics.



his relentless travels was the devil<sup>1</sup>. However, Agrippa found hospitality and protection everywhere within the occult circles. This fact has been correctly interpreted as proof of the existence of a network of hermetic-qabbalist secret societies that in the Renaissance had spread throughout Western Europe<sup>2</sup>.



### 5. The magician and the black dog

He visited Trithemius, who he considered as one of his main masters. Then he went to England where he joined with the first humanistic circle on the island, founded by Thomas More<sup>3</sup>. He fraternized with John Colet, a Herasmian who had already foretold Lutheran ideas. When he went to Italy in 1511, he had already made his ideological choices: he came in contact with Francesco Zorzi, with the judaizing Cardinal Aegidius from Viterbo and with *rabbi* Agostino Ricci<sup>4</sup>, a convert to Catholicism, but he was disappointed by the cautiousness and balance of the choices of the Italian humanists.

In Germany, later on, Agrippa became an ardent supporter of Luther and Calvin. He then went to France where, in 1526, he published his book *De Vanitate Scientiarum* (*On the vanity of Sciences*). The other book he was famous for among the humanists was *De Occulta Philosophia* (*On the Occult Philosophy*), published in the Flanders in 1533. Yates, through her exclusively historical approach, fails to comprehend the difference in perspective of the two texts<sup>5</sup>, even though, in line with the Warburg Institute, she is fundamentally partisan of both positions. In *De Vanitate Scientiarum* Agrippa criticizes all sciences and arts; not only the medieval *trivium*, *quadrivium* and scholastic theology, but also those new experimental sciences that had emerged during the fifteenth century. The critique is therefore extended to magic, *qabbalah*, alchemy, all together considered as 'monastic superstitions'. Therefore, according to Agrippa every science is futile wisdom, except for the message of the Gospel. Consequently, all cosmological and theological knowledge must be erased from the mind in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pickering Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella*, London, Warburg Institute, 1958, pp. 90-99.

<sup>2</sup> Paola Zambelli, *Umanesimo magico-astrologico e raggruppamenti segreti neoplatonici della preriforma*, Padova, Centro internazionale di studi umanistici, 1960; Charles G. Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas More was also sanctified four centuries after his execution, in 1935: These canonizations (see Joan of Arc) must be considered from a political point of view and were motivated by suspicious contingent interests: after the bolshevik revolution, in fact, the newly born Soviet Union declared that Thomas More's Utopia had been one of the inspiring texts of communism. It was perhaps in this way that the Vatican tried to reclaim More, even though his Utopia has nothing Catholic about it. It is certain, however, that the Herasmian Thomas More was the first to found an English foothold for hermetic-qabbalist magicians coming from the continent. This centre for gathering and mutual aid was to become a few decades later the beating heart of the Elizabethan occultism and the source of the subversive English expansion throughout the world.

<sup>4</sup> Nauert, *cit.*, pp.42-46.

<sup>5</sup> Yates, *cit.*, pp. 54-62.

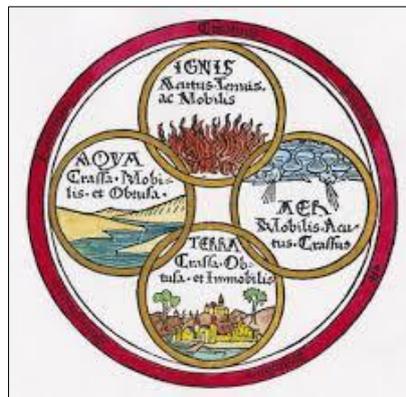


rely only on the original message of Jesus Christ<sup>1</sup>. Obviously, the Gospel was subject to free personal interpretation as per protestant custom.



### 6. The anti-Catholic hatred of Protestant occultism

On the other hand, in *De Occulta philosophia*, Agrippa asserted that the occult philosophy, meaning the practice of magic, was based on the tripartition of the universe. The world composed of the four elements was the domain of natural magic; the celestial world was the domain of the astral hermetic magic based on a pseudo-Pythagorean numerology; lastly, the superior or angelic world was the domain of ceremonial magic of Qabbalistic origin.



### 7. The four elements of Renaissance occultism

In the first, through sympathetic magic there is interaction with the elemental spirits, in the second with stellar demons, in the third with angelic hierarchies. From this synthesis it is clear that the message of *De Occulta philosophia* has nothing new to add to what had already been said by Ficino, Pico and others; but in Agrippa the magical and witchcraft substratum is finally uncovered. Agrippa, therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Protestantism in this sense defines itself as 'evangelical'; in other words, its 'religiosity' is based only on the free individualistic examination of the Bible (in particular of the Old Testament, because it is more Jewish and Qabbalistic), while it abrogates any ritual that is not an just an empty ceremony and rejects all the sapiential heritage of tradition accumulated over fifteen centuries.



had a main role in the divulgation and propaganda of those themes that until then had been kept strictly confidential or hidden with care.

Let us now try to explain what Yates did not find clear in the apparent inconsistency between the contents of the two writings of the German magician. The truth appears very simple to those who know the exterior exoteric structure of the monotheistic religions, in particularly of Catholicism. With the Protestant Reformation this structure was reintroduced in a completely reformed way. By consulting the Bible without any authoritative indication or certain critical guidance, the exoteric component turned into a faint religiosity devoided of any rites and doctrines: everyone had to imagine what God suggested in the sacred text, drawing from its dull rules of behaviour. Every science was considered superfluous, except for any practice that through competitiveness aimed towards the pursuit of wealth and social position. This is the “religious” or exoteric Protestantism valid for all the reformed faithful. Within the community and, somehow hidden from the eyes of outsiders, the new “esoterism” is established, an occult philosophy, as it is called, consisting in practical, astral or ceremonial magic. The pseudo religion was in this manner provided with a pseudo esoterism.



## 8. Utopia

A similar structure was described in Thomas More's *Utopia* and, a generation later, in the *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon, *Civitas Solis* by Tommaso Campanella and others. Later on, this fanciful societal project was insanely implemented through the “ideal communities”, among the thousand Protestant sects especially in North America. The philosophical-magic elite, dedicated within its own circle to the arcane practices of invocations of elementals, spirits and “angels”, appears to the outsiders as a trustworthy group of wise men, elders, philosophers. All the other members of these communities have the duty to work and pray God in order to obtain worldly success and social security and wealth, obviously in line with anyone's predestination. In short, a sort of *ora et labora* adapted to the worker ants.

We chose Agrippa as illustrative character to describe the sad decline of the West and also for his many connections throughout Europe; but studying any other Renaissance magician of the first half of the 16th century would have given similar results.



### 9. Ambiguity of angels evoked by occultists

France, also heavily contaminated by the Renaissance occultism, was also scene of a particularly intelligent reaction. Jean Bodin (1530-1596) in his book *De la démonomanie des sorciers* (*On the diabolical possession of sorcerers*)<sup>1</sup> demonstrated the contiguity between the magical infiltration into cultured circles and the spread of witchcraft at a popular level.



### 10. Jean Bodin

With great lucidity he denounced the Christian Qabbalah of the Marquis of Mirandola and Fra' Francesco de Zorzi, as well as the Protestant one of Reuchlin and Agrippa, to be a falsification of the true Jewish qabbalistic esoterism, and to represent a disturbing deviation in a magical-evocatory and witchcraft sense. Bodin with full awareness describes the plan to demolish the medieval tradition, indicating in Agrippa the most nefarious agent<sup>2</sup>. The times were changing and the Counter-Reformation was containing the heavy damage caused by the frantic anti-traditional protestant action of the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Paris, Librairie Le Livre Penseur, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, *cit.*, pp. 173-191.