

Prisca Theologia and Retrograde Phenomenology at Eranos : Corbin, Eliade, not Scholem

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theologia, is the assumption that Christianity «preserved» an ancient mystery which granted a triumphalist perspective both over other religions and traditional forms of Judaism. I will propose the second key term as retrograde phenomenology, an essentialist approach designed to uncover the alleged ancient mysteries and superior forms of religious ontology. The third term necessary to comprehend the Eranos enterprise is academic mystagogy, here regarded as the elaboration of uniquely «inspired» methods of interpreting religious texts. The second part of the article revisits the scholarly triad of Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade, and Gershom Scholem, famously associated with the Eranos enterprise by Steven Wasserstrom, more than two decades ago, and suggests a reassessment of their roles at the Ascona meetings. I suggest that Henry Corbin's formalist academic mystagogy embodied forms of subjective interpretations of the role of imagination in the texts, while Mircea Eliade's search for pristine origins promoted an imagined archaic horizon endowed with ontological significance. Finally, I situate Gershom Scholem's historical approach in direct opposition to Corbin and Eliade's mystagogical and perennial projects and suggest considering the Kabbalah scholar as a theoretical mystic, whose work explored the tensions between academic and metaphysical approaches to religion.

Résumé

Cet article propose une réévaluation des rencontres d'Eranos en analysant ses aspects sous-jacents en tant que «laboratoire de recherche spirituelle». Dans ce but, la première moitié de l'étude met en évidence l'approche de l'expérience religieuse préconisée par R. Otto en tant que source d'inspiration du projet Eranos, mais aussi le rôle de R. Otto en tant que mentor de Fröbe-Kapteyn. Nous proposons trois termes clés pour comprendre le caractère atemporel des conférences tenues à Ascona et leurs liens avec la pensée de la Renaissance. Le premier, *theologia*, reflète l'idée selon laquelle le christianisme aurait «préservé» un mystère antérieur auquel lui aurait conféré une perspective triomphaliste sur les autres religions et sur les formes traditionnelles de judaïsme. Un second terme clé est celui de phénoménologie rétrograde, qui désigne une approche essentialiste visant à recouvrer de prétendus mystères anciens et à découvrir des formes supérieures d'ontologie religieuse. Le troisième terme nécessaire à la compréhension du projet Eranos est celui de mystagogie académique, considérée ici comme l'élaboration d'une méthode «inspirée» d'interprétation des textes tout à fait singulière. La deuxième partie de l'étude revisite la triade académique constituée par les figures d'Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade et Gershom Scholem, toutes trois associées au projet Eranos dans les travaux de S. Wasserstrom, et propose une réévaluation de leurs rôles respectifs lors des réunions d'Ascona. La mystagogie académique d'Henry Corbin a incarné des formes d'interprétations subjectives du rôle de l'imagination dans les textes soufis, tandis que la recherche d'une sorte d'horizon originel par Mircea Eliade a promu l'imagination d'un passé archaïque doté d'une forte signification ontologique. Enfin, je propose d'opposer l'approche historique de Gershom Scholem aux projets mystagogiques et pérenialistes de Corbin et Eliade et suggère de considérer le grand spécificité de la Kabbale comme un mystique théorique, dont la recherche a exploré les tensions entre les approches académiques et métaphysiques de la religion.

Mots-clés :
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Résumé :

Cet article propose une réévaluation des rencontres d'Eranos en analysant ses aspects sous-jacents en tant que « laboratoire de recherche spirituelle ». Dans ce but, la première moitié de cette étude met en évidence l'approche de l'expérience religieuse préconisée par R. Otto en tant que source d'inspiration du projet Eranos, mais aussi le rôle de R. Otto en tant que mentor d'Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. Nous proposons trois termes clés pour comprendre le caractère atemporel des conférences tenues à Ascona et leurs liens avec la pensée de la Renaissance. Le premier, *prisca theologia*, reflète l'idée selon laquelle le christianisme aurait « préservé » un mystère antique, lequel lui aurait conféré une perspective triomphaliste sur les autres religions et sur les formes traditionnelles de judaïsme. Un second terme clé est celui de *phénoménologie rétrograde* : il désigne une approche essentialiste visant à recouvrer de prétendus mystères anciens et autres formes supérieures d'ontologie religieuse. Le troisième terme nécessaire à la compréhension du projet Eranos est celui de *mystagogie académique*, considérée ici comme l'élaboration d'une méthode « inspirée » d'interprétation des textes tout à fait singulière. La deuxième partie de cette étude revisite la triade académique constituée par les figures d'Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade, et Gershom Scholem, toutes trois associées au projet Eranos dans les travaux de S. Wasserstrom, et propose une réévaluation de leurs rôles respectifs lors des réunions d'Ascona. La mystagogie académique d'Henry Corbin a incarné des formes d'interprétations subjectives du rôle de l'imagination dans les textes soufis, tandis que la recherche d'une sorte d'horizon originel par Mircea Eliade a promu l'imagination d'un passé archaïque doté d'une forte signification ontologique. Enfin, je propose d'opposer l'approche historique de Gershom Scholem aux projets mystagogiques et pérenialistes de Corbin et Eliade et suggère de considérer le grand spécialiste de la Kabbale comme un *mystique théorique*, dont la recherche a exploré les tensions entre approches académiques et métaphysiques de la religion.

Abstract :

The article proposes a re-evaluation of the Eranos meetings by analyzing its underlying aspects as a « laboratory of spiritual scholarship ». To this aim, the first half of the article highlights R. Otto's approach to religious experience as a source of inspiration for the Eranos project, as the mentor of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, and it advances three key terms to understand the atemporal character of the lectures held at Ascona and their connections to Renaissance thinking. The first one, *prisca theologia*, is the assumption that Christianity « preserved » an ancient mystery which granted it a triumphalism perspective both over other religions and traditional forms of Judaism. I will propose the second key term as *retrograde phenomenology*, an essentialist approach designed to uncover alleged ancient mysteries and superior forms of religious ontology. The third term necessary to comprehend the Eranos enterprise is *academic mystagogy*, here regarded as the elaboration of uniquely « inspired » methods of interpreting religious texts. The second part of the article revisits the scholarly triad of Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade, and Gershom Scholem, famously associated with the Eranos enterprise by Steven Wasserstrom, more than two decades ago, and suggests a reassessment of their roles at the Ascona meetings. I suggest that Henry Corbin's form of academic mystagogy embodied forms of subjective interpretations of the role of imagination in Sufi texts, while Mircea Eliade's search for pristine origins promoted an imagined archaic highly endowed with ontological significance. Finally, I situate Gershom Scholem's historical approach in direct opposition to Corbin and Eliade's mystagogical and perennial projects and suggest considering the Kabbalah scholar as a *theoretical mystic*, whose work explored the tensions between academic and metaphysical approaches to religion.

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Introduction – Eranos: A Search for a Unifying Truth

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Indubitably, the Eranos conferences, in their different formats, running over the span of more than eighty years, constitute some of the most remarkable encounters between eminent scholars of religions and in the humanities. The volumes recording their lectures have become highly influential in the study of religion. In one way or another, the Eranos meetings provided the organizers and some of the participants with the chance to search for underlying and unifying truths, or an archetypal idea, as we learn from Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn – not a minor figure in the entire enterprise –, inspired as she was by the spiritual mentor of the encounters for several decades, Carl Gustav Jung¹. Ascona was an « island beyond time », as she depicted the idealized situation, which presumably transcended historical classifications in matters of religion². Fröbe-Kapteyn had the impression that the memories and pictures related to Eranos created a « unifying way »³. Let me point out that atemporality and sense of unity are often recurring in mystical experiences. It was, indeed, an escapist endeavor from the yokes of traditional forms of historical religions, and perhaps from history in general. The wonderful landscape, the distinct group of participants and finally, the relaxed atmosphere, generated some sort of mythical image, and many speakers returned annually for more than two decades⁴.

One of the questions the editors asked us to address is whether it was a laboratory of spiritual scholarship, which inspired the participant lecturers. My answer to this provocation is positive though complex: the intention of the organizers and the selection of participants indeed was to create such a laboratory. Regarding what happened *de facto* at Ascona, however, the result was more pedestrian. This means that we should take into consideration not just the good intentions of the organizers but also the backgrounds and needs of the scholars who participated to the meetings, and especially their pre-Eranos writings. If I may say it shortly, and perhaps blatantly, the participants I will discuss below attended the Eranos conferences not so

1 See GIOVANNI SORGE, « Love as Devotion: Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's Relationship with Eranos and Jungian Psychology », *Eranos Yearbook* 70 (2012), pp. 414-18, 422, 425-428, especially p. 425; RICCARDO BERNARDINI, *Jung a Eranos. Il progetto della psicologia complessa*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2011, pp. 90-109; and HANS THOMAS HAKL, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Montreal – Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013, pp. 189, 318.

2 Sorge, « Love as Devotion », p. 425.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 388.

4 STEVEN M. WASSERSTROM, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999; *Id.*, *The Eranos Movement: A Story of Hermeneutics*, éd. TILO SCHABERT, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2016; HAKL, *Eranos*.

much to listen but to lecture, although each of them did it for different reasons. I assume that few were open enough to an exchange of views, and I can hardly find any who were ready to be convinced by what they heard during the conferences. Many of the participants were already mature scholars at the time of their visits to Ascona, with a great list of publications in print, and in my opinion, it is hard to identify a significant shift in their own studies, especially generated by their participation to the Eranos conferences.

In spite of the fact that the scholarly dimension of the participants was evidently predominant, the Ascona meetings also promoted the search for something atemporal. The organizers preferred to ignore, through the choice of the topics for these encounters, what else happened in their immediate geographical vicinity during World War II. Surprisingly enough, during the following decades, not one single Eranos session or meeting has been dedicated to the horrors of the Holocaust. When I mentioned this astonishing fact during an evening discussion following a Fetzer–Eranos lecture at Casa Gabriella, in 2009, the reaction I received was rather mixed, but nothing has changed since then. The Eranos search for an elitist type of religiosity, taking into account just a few aspects of other religions, represented a noble albeit quite utopian project, which was both colored by underlying assumptions and detached from history and its vicissitudes. Let me start by engaging with one of these assumptions.

The search for a certain form of religious unity started long before the first Eranos encounter, with the influential thought of another mentor of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, the famous scholar of religion Rudolph Otto, and his reading of earlier sources. Although most of this essay deals with three eminent scholars who were active at the Eranos encounters since the late forties and early fifties, let me start with the towering figure of Otto, who never participated in those meetings, being too ill to travel to Ascona. He remained the admired mentor of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn who initiated and financed the entire Eranos enterprise for most of its productive years and, to a certain extent, perpetuated Otto's visions, even during her direct association with the second paternal figure of Eranos, C. G. Jung. My claim is that the unifying vision about religion proposed by Otto radiated, to various degrees, throughout the underlying conceptions of some of the participants to the Eranos conferences and, in some cases, also in the study of Judaism. This unifying aim in the study of religion is eminently consonant with Jung's unifying psychoanalytical approach.

Otto was, beyond any doubt, an accomplished scholar, who mastered the study of many religions, in their original languages, and especially of their mystical manifestations, and who remained, at the same time, a deeply believing Lutheran. His original approach to religion is, nonetheless, a combination of Kantian, Hegelian, and Schleiermacherian elements. Rudolph Otto's famous Neo-Kantian theory about the nature of what he designated as « the numinous »⁵, or a *mysterium*, remains uncannily homogenous and transcendental. It is a matter of a personal belief that the holy is, basically, conceived to be the same in all religions.

⁵ Compare to MOSHE IDEL, « *Ganz Andere*: On Rudolph Otto and Concepts of Holiness in Jewish Mysticism », *Daat* 57-59 (2006), pp. v-XLIV; and ID., « R. Nehemia ben Shlomo the Prophet's Commentary on Eleazar ha-Qalir's Hymn "And the Beasts who are found at the Four Corners of the Throne" », *Kabbalah* 41 (2018), pp. 175-176 (in Hebrew). For more critiques of his influential vision of religion from the perspective of Jewish sources see ELIEZER BERKOVITS, « The Concept of Holiness », in the collection of his essays, *Essential Essays on Judaism*, éd. DAVID HAZONY, Jerusalem, Shalem Press, 2002, pp. 247-314; and see also BURTON M. LEISER, « The Sanctity of Profane: A Pharisaic Critique of Rudolph Otto », *Judaism* 20 (1971), pp. 87-93.

Otto also expressed his strong conviction about the superiority of Christianity in a rather explicit statement, at the beginning of his most famous book about the nature of holiness, translated as *The Idea of the Holy*:

Christianity not only possesses such conceptions⁶ but possesses them in unique clarity and abundance, and this is, though not the sole or even the chief, yet a very sign of its superiority over religions of other forms and at other levels. This must be asserted at the outset and with the most positive emphasis.⁷

Such a clear declaration renders somehow superfluous the pious end of the introduction added to Otto's book by the English translator: «He was himself rooted in the Christian faith, a committed man, to whom the central truth in religion was the worship of God as revealed in Christ»⁸. Any pious scholar could become an edifying human being in Christianity or in any other religion. When this scholar, however, opens a study in phenomenology of religion in general by emphasizing the superiority of his own religious convictions, there is some place for suspicion insofar as his objective scholarship is concerned and also about the potential relevance of its hermeneutical categories. Even more obvious is the triumphal tone in Otto's description of the adoption of the concepts of life and light in early Christianity, «into itself from the religions at rivalry with it; and justly so, for only in Christianity do they win home»⁹. Still more troubling in content is the note following «with it»: «And thereby drains these religions of their life-blood, according to "the right of the stronger". And henceforth these elements belong to Christianity indissolubly as its very own»¹⁰. If the assumption that what is good finds, ultimately, its place in Christianity and «drains» thereby other religions (and it is bizarre that Otto did not find it necessary to become more explicit as to which religions exactly he intends), the imposition of the Christian vision of the Holy on other religions becomes, somehow, part of the «right of the stronger». This is what I propose to call *retrograde phenomenology*, the one that takes us back to an old, allegedly uniform, superior, shared type of religious ontology. As I shall try to show below, there is a certain affinity between three different approaches in the study of religion: the so-called *prisca theologia*; an essentialist, retrograde phenomenology; and, finally, triumphalism related to mystagogy.

Jung himself declared once that the encounter of Europeans with Hindu religion is very difficult since «we are rooted in Christian soil»¹¹. Elsewhere, Jung presents the problem of «correct» psychology in terms of Christian theology, assuming that this religion is more advanced and truer in comparison to biblical Judaism. This is a classical argument, frequently used both in late antique and medieval polemics and in Christian apologetic texts. Still more surprising are Jung's remarks on the paramount psychological and mystical significance of Jesus' descent to hell:

6 Namely, rational concepts about God (M. Idel).

7 RUDOLF OTTO, *The Idea of the Holy*, translated by JOHN HARVEY, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1959, p. 15 (emphasis added).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 108 n. 1.

11 C. J. JUNG, «Background of the Psychology of Christian Alchemical Symbolism», reprinted in *Collected Works of C. J. Jung*, vol. 9.2, *AION*, translated by R. F. C. HULL, Bollingen Series XX, New York, Pantheon, 1959, pp. 173-183, here p. 176.

It is the prefiguration and anticipation of a future condition, a glimmering of an unspoken, half-conscious union of ego and non-ego. Rightly called a *unio mystica*, it is the fundamental experience of all religions that have any life in them and have not yet degenerated into confessionalism; that have safeguarded the mystery of which the others know only the rites it produced – empty bags from which the gold has long since vanished.¹²

The opposition between rites versus mysteries is fascinating. Similarly, we read earlier in the same book:

All distinction from God is separation, estrangement, a falling away. The Fall was inevitable even in paradise. Therefore, Christ is «without the stain of sin» because he stands for the whole of the Godhead and is not distinct from it by reason of his manhood. Man, however, is branded by the stain of separation from God. This state of thing would be insupportable if there were nothing to set against evil but the law and the decalogue as in pre-Christian Judaism – until the reformer and rabbi Jesus tried to introduce the more advanced and psychologically more correct view that not fidelity to law but love and kindness are the antithesis of evil.¹³

I am aware, of course, of other interpretations of Judaism, and especially of Jewish mysticism, in Jung's writings, but I nevertheless regard these statements as relevant since they imply an uneven antithesis between Christianity and classical forms of Judaism, with Christianity presented as being the more advanced of the two.

A Renaissance Background of the Eranos Encounters

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In a way, Jung's statements, above-cited, do not reflect a totally new attitude; similar positions were used to indicate the transformation of Jewish Kabbalah into a Christian lore¹⁴. Already Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, one of the outstanding figures of Renaissance humanism, declares in his *Heptaplus*, a commentary on Genesis 1:

But because what is said by the Hebrews is new to the Latins, it could not be easily understood by our people unless (...) I explained a great part, or almost the totality of the ancient teachings of the Hebrew dogmas. I decided to postpone this until somewhere else I had written about Hebrew dogmas in greater detail and had made known to my contemporaries these ideas, showing how much these ideas agree with the Egyptian wisdom, how much with the Platonic philosophy, and how much with Catholic truth. And, therefore, if I find the Hebrew agree with us in something, I shall order them to stand by

¹² JUNG, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, translated by R. F. C. HULL, in *Collected Works of C. J. Jung*, vol. 14, Bollingen Series XX, New York, Pantheon, 1963, p. 171.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁴ See already this thesis in my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, pp. 5-6, 12, 14, 24-25, 262-263, *Id.*, «Jewish Kabbalah in Christian Garb, Some Phenomenological Remarks», in MICHAEL TERRY éd., *The Hebrew Renaissance*, Chicago, Newberry Library, 1997, pp. 10-16, to be compared to the general approach adopted later by WASSERSTROM's second chapter of *Religion after Religion*, and by ELLIOT R. WOLFSON, *Heidegger and Kabbalah: Hidden Gnosis and the Path of Poïesis*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2019.

the ancient traditions of their fathers; if I find a place where they disagree, then drawn up in Catholic legions, I shall make an attack against them. Finally, whatever I find foreign to the evangelic truth, I shall refute in keeping with my power; while any principle which is sacred and true, as from a wrongful possessor, I shall transfer from the Synagogue to us, the legitimate Israelites.¹⁵

Giovanni Pico made two different claims: that « we », namely the Christians, are the « true Israelites » – the ancient topos of *verus Israel* – and that he transferred the so-called « dogmas » from the Synagogue to « us », namely to Christians. Who are indeed the legitimate Israelites, may be a matter of theological debate, and I shall not try to solve now this perennial problem. When dealing with his own activity, however, we may learn something about the ways in which Giovanni Pico thought and operated. Let me draw attention to the resort to the term « transfer » in the context of bringing within Christianity topics he found in Kabbalah and announced in the Gospels. I assume that the dogmas of the ancient Jews, which are new for the « Latin », are the Kabbalistic views, which Giovanni Pico also turned to in his earlier writings of his short career, and to which he indeed hints here. The way in which Pico describes his activity is reminiscent of Ficino's transfer of knowledge from other mainly pagan sources rather than Jewish ones, or later, of Reuchlin's claim that he had recovered the lost Pythagoreanism, a symbolic tradition, via its surviving source, Kabbalah¹⁶. According to Giovanni Pico, « Kabbalah » *qua* dogma has affinities to a variety of speculative bodies of literature, all of them conceived of as ancient, namely as part of the *prisca theologia*.

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On the other hand, it seems that a stark dichotomy between the Talmudists and the Kabbalists was proposed by one of Giovanni Pico's followers, Johannes Reuchlin. In several instances his formulations reflect a distinctly Christian attitude towards the two most representative forms of Judaism¹⁷. His representation of what he calls *the Talmudists*, said to worship God out of fear, as opposed to the Kabbalists, who do it out of love, mirrors the famous Christian distinction between Jews and Christians. In fact, Reuchlin conceived Kabbalah in terms very close to those in which the Christians of his time understood Christianity. This attitude, already found *in nuce* in Giovanni Pico, become much more elaborate in Reuchlin and was later disseminated in European culture.

For some of the Eranos participants mentioned above, Kabbalah was not a new discovery: Eliade read volumes on the topic in his youth, in the 1920s, encountering a Kabbalah that had been Christianized, and Jung often referred to Kabbalah, in some cases in Latin translations – which means Christianized – long before Scholem was invited to the Eranos conferences. Previously, Kabbalah was considered by Renaissance figures as part of a *prisca theologia*

¹⁵ GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *Heptaplus*, translated by JESSIE BREWER MCGAWN, New York, Philosophical Library, 1977), Introduction to Part III, pp. 51-52. See also FRANCO BACCHELLI, *Giovanni Pico e Pier Leone da Spoleto, Tra filosofia dell'amore e tradizione cabalistica*, Firenze, Olschki, 2001, pp. 63-69; MOSHE IDEL, « Kabbalah and Hermeticism in Dame Frances A. Yates's Renaissance », in *Ésotérisme, gnosés & imaginaire symbolique: Mélanges offerts à Antoine Faivre*, R. CARON, J. GODWIN, W. J. HANEGRAAFF, J.-L. VIEILLARD-BARON éds., Leuven, Peeters, 2001, pp. 75-76, Id., *Mircea Eliade: From Magic to Myth*, 2nd éd., New York, Peter Lang, 2014, pp. 167-168.

¹⁶ JOHANNES REUCHLIN, *On the Art of the Kabbalah: De Arte Cabalistica*, translated by MARTIN GOODMAN and SARA GOODMAN, Lincoln, NE – London, Nebraska University Press – Bison Book, 1993, p. 39.

¹⁷ See the discussions referred in n. 59 below.

and thus in concordance with Platonic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and atomistic concepts that were allegorically or symbolically hinted at in Kabbalistic literature. Many scholars of Kabbalah have analyzed the literary structures of some Kabbalistic treatises and engaged in lengthy discussions on the nature of the ten divine powers, the sefirot, of the source of evil, of the feminine aspects in the divine realm, and so on. To understand Kabbalah is, accordingly, seen as tantamount to understanding its tenets, not its practices or techniques. Kabbalah became primarily a concealed philosophy whose inner message has to be decoded, owing to the obscurity of its terminology and its allegedly pervasive symbolism. This attitude to Kabbalah was also embraced by various Enlightenment thinkers and adopted by modern researchers of Kabbalah and even by modern thinkers¹⁸. Ultimately, this amounts to privileging the cognitive functions of humans – such as the paramount importance attributed to *contemplatio*¹⁹, following Greek philosophical axiology – much less consonant with archaic rituals, provided the Paulinian emphasis on faith. In Hegelianism, religious developments do not depend on human activities, but on the inevitable evolution of the spirit.

Prisca theologia is represented here by the assumption that Christianity «preserved» an ancient mystery, which is pervasive from the phenomenological point of view, leading to triumphalism. Jung's bias towards the superiority of Christianity is quite evident, at least in a certain period of his life, and it is reminiscent of the tone adopted by both Pico della Mirandola and Rudolph Otto.

While I see no compelling reason to consider Giovanni Pico, Reuchlin, Otto, Jung, or Fröbe-Kapteyn as anti-Semites, I can detect in the texts I discussed above a distinct sense of triumphalism towards other religions and, implicitly, over traditional forms of Judaism. This has to do with a certain uneasiness with the manifestations of classical forms of Judaism, ritualistically oriented, an uneasiness shared also by many «enlightened» Jews since the nineteenth century. The allegedly speculative nature of Kabbalah is the reason why Kabbalistic forms of Judaism exerted, at times, so much intellectual attraction, although they were misunderstood. The problems came from the rather negative attitude towards rituals, on one hand²⁰, and from the search for the contemplation as a supreme, unifying value, with roots already in antiquity, on the other hand.

In one way or another these authors have been inspired by a vision developed in the Renaissance known as *prisca theologia*. Terms like «traditionalism», «occultism», «Western Esotericism» (or sometimes «esotericism» alone), or «*Philosophia perennis*», stem from different sources, and

¹⁸ See my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 262-263.

¹⁹ See the comprehensive study of ANDRÉ-JEAN FESTUGIÈRE, *Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon*, Paris, J. Vrin, 1950; and for Middle- and Neo-Platonic forms of contemplation, see BERNARD MCGINN, *Foundations of Mysticism*, New York, Crossroad, 1991, pp. 23-61; and DAVID WINSTON, «Philo and the Contemplative Life», in ARTHUR GREEN éd., *Jewish Spirituality*, New York, Crossroad, 1986, vol. I, pp. 198-231; FRIEDRICH HEILER, «Die Kontemplation in der Christlichen Mystik. I. Die Geschichte der Kontemplation in der christlichen Frömmigkeit – II. Die Kontemplation in der christlichen Gemeinschaftsmystik – III. Die Kontemplation in der individuellen Hochmystik», *Eranosjahrbuch* 1 (1934), pp. 245-326. See also GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, translated by JOACHIM NEUTGROSCHTEL, éd. JONATHAN CHIPMAN, New York, Schocken Books, 1991, p. 216; and ID., «Sin and Punishment: Some Remarks Concerning Biblical and Rabbinical Ethics», in JOSEPH M. KITAGAWA, CHARLES H. LONG éd., *Myth and Symbols, Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969, pp. 175-176.

²⁰ See below, n. 60.

cover somewhat different notions²¹. Nevertheless, they often overlap, when referring to forms of ancient wisdom, passed over for many generations, and reflecting core teachings, although conveyed through different terminologies in different cultures, philosophies, or religions. Most often than not, that transmitted wisdom is supposed to disclose an ontological reality. Consequently, the task of the thinkers subscribing to this approach is imagined to be that of detecting the correspondences between various traditions and decode the common wisdom hidden under « apparently » diverging nomenclatures. This brings us to what I call *retrograde phenomenology*, one that is « discovered » by going back in history and decoding the mysteries shared by ancient authorities.

The spectrum of exegetical techniques designed to uncover that wisdom vary from allegory to symbolism or numerical calculations, and this is also the case with the content of that ancient wisdom according to each of the exponents. I am less concerned here, however, with the contents attributed to this wisdom and more interested in the underlying assumption about the existence and availability of a universal message or truth. I am also much less concerned with the analysis of various contents and techniques of religions, in modern scholarship, which naturally vary from one scholar to another. This « universal message » implies, in many cases, the existence of one basic truth, which transcends the variety of expressions and its ways of transmission and is prone to encouraging triumphalist approaches, which culminate in mystagogy. This was the intention of Fröbe-Kapteyn (in the opening remarks to the 1937 Eranos conference), who was quoted as follows:

Mrs Froebe stated very aptly that we are not here to resuscitate dead and forgotten voices from the shades of the past, but rather to repair and replenish, in a religious spirit, a spiritual chain that has not been destroyed by time. We are here to receive the tradition of a life that is not extinct. We are here to carry a tradition which, even though it does embrace the distant past, also looks towards the future.²²

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My claim is that thinkers that operated in such a way are not just religious authors attempting to validate their particular type of religion or philosophy, like the Renaissance figures Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Johann Reuchlin, or modern traditionalists like René Guénon and Julius Evola did, but also scholars of religion acting as such in prestigious academic frameworks, Eranos lecturers, and they still have an immense impact in recent understandings of religion.

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- 21 DANIEL P. WALKER, *The Ancient Theology, Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1972; CHARLES SCHMITT, « Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz », *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27.1 (1966), pp. 505-532; WILHELM SCHMIDT-BIGGEMAN, *Philosophia Perennis. Historische Umrissse abendländischer Spiritualität in Antike, Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1998; WOUTER HANEGRAAFF, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 5-76; and the illuminating review by MIRCEA ELIADE, « Some Notes on *Theosophia perennis*: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Henry Corbin », *History of Religions* 19 (1979), pp. 167-176. For similar assumptions among Jewish thinkers in the Middle Ages and Renaissance see, e.g., NISSIM YOSHA, « The Impact of the Renaissance Writings on 17th century Kabbalist Herrera », *Accademia* 3 (2002), pp. 113-129; Id., « Abraham Cohen de Herrera: An Outstanding Exponent of *Prisca Theologia* in Early Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam », in JOZEF MICHMAN éd., *Dutch Jewish History*, Assen, Van Gorcum, 1993, vol. III, pp. 117-126; MOSHE IDEL, « Kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy in R. Isaac and Jehudah Abravanel », in M. DORMAN, Z. LEVY éd.s., *The Philosophy of Leone Ebreo*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985, pp. 73-112 (in Hebrew); Id., « Kabbalah, Platonism and *Prisca Theologia*: The Case of Menashe ben Israel », in YOSEF KAPLAN, HENRY MÉSHOULAN, RICHARD H. POPKIN éd.s., *Menasseh ben Israel and his World*, Leiden, Brill, 1989, pp. 207-219; Id., « *Prisca Theologia* in Marsilio Ficino and in Some Jewish Treatments », in M. J. B. ALLEN and VALERY REES éd.s., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, Leiden, Brill, 2001, pp. 137-158; Id., « Kabbalah and Hermeticism in Dame Frances A. Yates's Renaissance »; and FABRIZIO LELLI, « *Prisca philosophia* and *docta religio*: The Boundaries of Rational Knowledge in Jewish and Christian Humanist Thought », *Jewish Quarterly Review* 91 (2000), pp. 53-100.
- 22 ERNESTO BUONAIUTI, « Ecclesia spiritualis », in Joseph Campbell, éd., *Spirit and Nature: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 240.

Henry Corbin (1903-1978)

Corbin, Eliade, and Scholem belong to a triad discussed together as part of an Eranos scholarly ethos by Steven M. Wasserstrom. Though I accept some of his points, I regard their scholarship as being much less homogenous than he did, and I take the role of the Eranos encounters to be much less decisive for their intellectual development than he claimed²³.

The first scholar to be addressed here, Henry Corbin, lectured for more than twenty-five years at Eranos conferences, and has been closely related to Western esotericism, a connection that became more evident during the last years of his life²⁴. However, he testifies that his decisive encounter with the writings of Suhrawardi took place long before his invitation to Eranos, around 1939:

through my meeting with Suhrawardi, my spiritual destiny for the passage through this world was sealed. Platonism, expressed in terms of the Zoroastrian angelology of ancient Persia, illuminated the path that I was seeking.²⁵

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi, the twelfth-century Sufi exponent of the theory of primordial wisdom, had a strong impact on Corbin's own worldview²⁶. Also a philosopher himself, Corbin emphasized the preeminently noetic purpose of the Sufi masters when dealing with the role of active imagination, one of the key concepts in his scholarship:

But it can also become increasingly transparent, for its sole purpose is to enable the mystic to gain knowledge of being as it is, that is to say, the knowledge that delivers, because it is the gnosis of salvation. This occurs when the gnostic understands that the pleremulti [!] successive forms, their movements and their actions, appear to be separate from the One only when they are veiled by a veil without transparency. Once transparency is achieved, he knows what they are and why they are [...].²⁷

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Moreover, a page later, Corbin offers an insight into not so much the Sufi materials but into his own judgment of it, writing again about active imagination as follows: « man's Active Imagination cannot be a vain fiction, since it is this same theophanic Imagination which, in and by the human being, continues to reveal what is showed itself by first imagining it »²⁸. I wonder whether this is a « Sufi statement » or a « Corbin statement ». Hard to decide, and therein lies the great problem: generalizations in matters of religion include, *in potentia*, ontological presuppositions which blur the gaps between the scholarly analysis of texts and systems on the one hand, and ontological tenets privileged by the scholar, on the other hand. A sympathetic reading of religious text is very important, but one that is too sympathetic may turn into an obstacle. In any case, other scholars writing about the same topics have different interpretations²⁹.

²³ WASSERSTROM, *Religion after Religion*, *passim*, especially p. 248.

²⁴ ELIADE, « Some Notes on *Theosophia perennis* »; and WASSERSTROM, *Religion after Religion*, pp. 145-155.

²⁵ Quoted by CHRISTIAN JAMBET éd., *Henry Corbin, Cahier de l'Herne*, Paris, L'Herne, 1981, pp. 40-41.

²⁶ See MEHDI AMIN RAZAVI, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination*, Richmond, Curzon, 1997, pp. 6, 23, 51, 65, 68, 103.

²⁷ See HENRY CORBIN, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 187 (emphases added). This passage was quoted and discussed by WASSERSTROM, *Religion after Religion*, p. 95.

²⁸ CORBIN, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 188, and compare also to p. 190: « Imagination cannot be characterized as "illusory" because it is the organ and substance of this [God's] auto-revelation ». See also *ibid.*, pp. 216-220.

²⁹ FAZLUR RAHMAN, « Dream, Imagination and *Ālam al-Mithāl* », *Islamic Studies* 3 (1964), pp. 167-180; GREGORY A. LIPTON, *Rethinking Ibn 'Arabi*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018. See also *Id.*, « De-Semitizing Ibn 'Arabi: Aryanism and the Schuonian Discourse of Religious Authenticity », *Numen* 64 (2017), pp. 258-263.

The retrograde ontology related to imagination is prominent elsewhere :

there remains no hope for recovering the reality sui generis of a suprasensible world which is neither the empirical world of the senses nor the abstract world of the intellect. It has furthermore for a long time now seemed to us radically impossible to rediscover the actual reality – we would say the reality in act – proper to the « Angelic World », a reality prescribed in Being itself, not in any way a myth dependent on socio-political or socio-economic infrastructures. It is impossible to penetrate, in the way in which one penetrates into a real world, into the universe of the Zoroastrian angelology (...) we would say as much of the angelophanies of the Bible ». ³⁰

He distinguishes sharply between what he calls the *imaginaire*, and the term *imaginal – mundus imaginalis* –, which he invented, writing with a great confidence that :

The seriousness of the role of the Imagination is stressed by our [Iranian] philosophers when they state that it can be « the Tree of Blessedness » or on the contrary « the Accursed Tree » of which the Qur'an speaks (...) The imaginary can be innocuous, the imaginal never can. ³¹

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I am especially interested in the adverb « never » which sums up the ontic status of the spiritual organ. How a scholar knows something like that is a great quandary for me. In this context Corbin repeatedly refers to the interesting similarity between the visions of the Great Man in the Muslim traditions and in Emmanuel Swedenborg, as a proof for this alleged shared organ ³². It is this organ that is deemed to be capable of perceiving that « between the universe that can be apprehended by pure intellectual perception (...) and the universe perceptible to senses (...) there is an intermediate world, the world of Ideas-Images, of archetypal figures, of subtle substances, of "immaterial matter" (...) The organ of this world is active imagination » ³³.

The contemplative dimension of Corbin's approach reflects just another side of the profound impact of Platonism on the three monotheistic religions, although to quite different degrees. ³⁴ The ethos of his spiritual quest, extracted from the last reverberations of Platonism in the Middle Ages, and especially from the « illumination » type of Sufism, fits the agenda of the first series of Eranos encounters. He adds his own observation about the status of the revelation, however : it requires a special human organ, and it is correlated to biblical types of revelations.

The Active Imagination guides, anticipates, molds sensory perception; that is why it transmutes sensory data into symbols. The Burning Bush is only a brushwood fire if it is merely perceived by the sensory organs. In order that Moses may perceive the Burning Bush and hear the Voice calling him « from the right side of the valley » – in short, in order that there may be a theophany – an organ of trans-sensory perception is needed. ³⁵

³⁰ HENRY CORBIN, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, translated by N. PEARSON, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. VII-VIII.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. VII-X.

³² See, e.g., CORBIN, *Alone with the Alone*, pp. 354-355 n. 41, 355 n. 5. However, the explanation is much simpler, since it is possible to refer to Hebrew Kabbalistic sources Swedenborg probably studied, where his sources may be found. See MOSHE IDEL, *The Angelic World: Apotheosis and Theophany*, Tel Aviv, Yediyot, 2008, pp. 72-73 (in Hebrew).

³³ CORBIN, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 4.

³⁴ See HENRY CORBIN, *Temple et contemplation: Essais sur l'Islam iranien*, Paris, Flammarion, 1981.

³⁵ CORBIN, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 80.

This assumes a certain spiritual, inner, understanding of the bush revelation, which is hardly biblical. Bringing together Suhrawardi and Ibn 'Arabi is one story, falling as they do in the area of Corbin's specific scholarly expertise, but claiming that both Moses and Swedenborg needed the same subtle organ for the sake of revelation is another story, which implies some form of ontological type of imagination, spread over different continents and mystical figures. It is hard to distinguish between the scholar's retrograde phenomenology of the existence of one type of revelation and ontology stretched across histories, languages and religions, on one hand, and what can be found in his diverse sources, on the other hand.

As a scholar of Ibn 'Arabi adequately noticed: «Any reader of *Creative Imagination* soon begins to wonder where Ibn al-'Arabi ends and where Corbin begins»³⁶. Perhaps, we may even ask, «where Corbin ends and where Ibn 'Arabi starts». If so, he was not just a modest exponent of the Sufi views on active imagination and of the imaginal world, namely a scholar, or, as assumed by Steven Wasserstrom, a prophet³⁷, but a mystagogue, as we learn especially from his lectures, late in his life, related to the inauguration of the so-called University of St. John of Jerusalem.

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986)

In the vein of my pedestrian approach as discussed above, I regard Mircea Eliade's invitation and his numerous visits to Eranos as an immense and decisive step for a scholar who did not have a permanent academic position in France or Romania, and who had a past that was, at least politically, dubious. Indubitably, this was a turning point in his career, and it would not be an exaggeration to see the relations that were woven in Moscia as having a great contribution to his ascent to glory. Despite this crucial point, however, the impact of the scholars gathered at Ascona and of the Eranos atmosphere is rather negligible in his scholarship, when compared to his pre-Eranos writings³⁸.

It would be superfluous to try to present Eliade's abundant *opus* – in fact *opera* – and the vast scholarship on his views³⁹. Here I would like to refer to a certain point that has also received due attention, but put a certain accent on it. Long before Eranos meetings started, the young Eliade already read books about Kabbalah, basically Christian versions of Kabbalah in French⁴⁰, part of what is called today Western esotericism.⁴¹ Moreover, he wrote an M.A. thesis on the thought of the Italian Renaissance, where Kabbalah is mentioned oftentimes⁴².

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36 WILLIAM C. CHITTICK, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1989, p. XIX.

37 WASSERSTROM, *Religion after Religion*, p. 154.

38 IDEL, *Mircea Eliade*, p. 256.

39 See, e.g., DOUGLAS ALLEN, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, New York – London, Routledge, 1998; WILHELM DANCA, *Mircea Eliade: Definitio Sacri*, Iași, Ars Longa, 1998; or IDEL, *Mircea Eliade*.

40 IDEL, *Mircea Eliade*, pp. 89, 157-161, 256.

41 The ongoing relationship of Eliade with esoteric circles during all his life is well documented. See, e.g., MARCEL TOLCEA, *Eliade, Esotericul*, Bucharest, Est, 2012; ANTOINE FAIVRE, «Modern Western Esoteric Currents in the Works of Mircea Eliade, the Extent and the Limits of their Presence», in CHRISTIAN K. WEDEMAYER, WENDY DONIGER éds., *Hermeneutics, Politics and the History of Religions*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 147-157.

42 ELIADE, *Contributions à la philosophie de la Renaissance*, translated by ALAIN PARUIT, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, pp. 26, 27, 47-48.

Eliade tried to operate as both a scholar and as a religious reformer, and in the latter hypostasis he attempted a return to a pristine origin, just as some medieval Christian figures tried to retrieve the original, or authentic, ancient Christianity, a classic retrograde move. He had a clear propensity toward the archaic. While the monotheistic understandings of religion represented an allegedly advanced stage, yoked with the assumption of a progressive-Hegelian structure, Eliade worked with the very opposite vector: the good times are not in the future, but have already flowered in the distant past, and true religion is to be sought in the understanding of the role of the cyclical return to primordial times, *in illo tempore*. Instead of the monotheistic vision based on the stark opposition of proper worship and true, exclusive faith versus false ones, and the revelation of the totally different entity in some privileged places, times, and individuals, Eliade adopted a much more Hindu-oriented view in order to emphasize ambiguity, coincidences of opposites, and the veiled existence of God even within the banality of quotidian life. One sort of privileged theological *imaginaire* – the Western monotheistic one as represented by Rudolph Otto's Christian stand, as seen above – has been substituted by another one, a combination between Eastern, Hindu theology revolving around *maya* as camouflage, and imagined as intervening in the affairs of this world, including in Eliade's own career, on one hand, and on the other hand, a certain Christian vision of Incarnation, presented as a comprehensive vision of religion in Eliade's theory of the sacred. One of the main questions was, for Eliade, how to perceive it. As he says in a letter:

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Condemned as we are to decipher the « mysteries » and « to discover the way to redemption » via culture, namely through *book* (not via oral traditions transmitted from a master to a disciple) we have nothing better to do than to deepen the dialectics of the mysterious *coincidentia oppositorum*, which allows us to discover « the sacred » camouflaged in the « profane » but also to *resacralize in a creative manner* the historical moment, in other words to transfigure it, by attributing to it a transcendental dimension (or « an intention »).⁴³

Eliade's position differs sharply from Corbin's hypothesis of an Abrahamic tradition, which is in fact much more Platonic, postulating another theory of an archaic, pristine, more « authentic » religiosity. Eliade militated for a Pre-Socratic, archaic type of rural religion, and thus the opinions of the two scholars differ dramatically. Nevertheless, they share a common vision of the active imagination, as pointed out by Adriana Berger:

Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade, have revived a positive notion of the imagination, understood not merely as fantasy but as the scene of an encounter with other worlds. In their own respective works they both recovered a metaphysics of the imagination that, despite superficial resemblances, differs significantly from a Romantic conception.⁴⁴

However, it seems that resacralization is not just a matter of decoding or interpreting, but also a subtle call for participation in what happens in the world, as part of a retrograde theory found, for example, in the following reflection during World War II:

⁴³ ELIADE, *Correspondence*, éd. MIRCEA HANDOCA, Bucharest, 2004, vol. I, p. 112 (emphases in the original).

⁴⁴ ADRIANA BERGER, « The Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade », *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), pp. 141-156, here p. 141.

The destructions of the war have a sense; they fulfill a role in a universal equilibrium. War – like death in the individual condition – corresponds to that cosmic act that is ignored by man or feared by him: regression to the primordial amorphous, where all is lost within each other, melted in a unity. War fulfills the same role – understandably, on another level – like orgy (...). I believe that I am one of the few moderns that understand the value and necessity of orgy. War is resembling it (...) *mahapralaya*; the redoing of the primitive unity, of the chaos.⁴⁵

This is the antipodes of the Platonic organized universe, since it calls for return to the primordial inchoate state. Orgy was by no means a theoretical issue in Eliade's life, especially in that period⁴⁶. The decipherment of the world is, therefore, not just a matter of scholarly hermeneutics but also involves some form of active participation. This participation invites also some form of mystagogy⁴⁷.

Gershom Scholem (1897-1982)

Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, was neither a triumphalist, nor a perennialist, nor embraced a retrograde phenomenology, even less a mystagogue. He was much more historically and textually oriented than the other two scholars or Rudolph Otto, attributing to a historical event – the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula – a major role in the development of Jewish mysticism⁴⁸. Moreover, unlike Corbin and Eliade, Scholem was not a Heideggerian, and he was less prone to attribute a metaphysical role to imagination. Neither was he so fond of archetypes as the two other scholars were⁴⁹. Despite the sharp methodological divergences between his studies and those of the other two, their relations were collegial, sometimes even cordial, especially that between Scholem and Corbin, although the picture is much more complex.

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For Scholem, the Eranos encounters were not a place for a special religious experience, but a unique occasion to lecture in German to an international audience, and to expose his phenomenology of Jewish mysticism to a select audience. In the post-Holocaust nascent state of Israel, in 1949, when he was first invited to lecture in Ascona, there was no place for him to lecture in German; although there were many German speakers in his immediate entourage in Jerusalem and at the Hebrew University, only very rarely these were intellectuals interested in Kabbalah.

Unlike Eliade and Corbin, in the late 1940s Scholem already had an international career since his series of lectures delivered in English in New York in 1939, which became the famous *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, printed by Schocken Books in 1941. His basic *Bildung* and first cultural language was German, and two of his most important books, *Major Trends* and *Origins of Kabbalah*, as well as his Eranos lectures, were written originally in German, and then translated into English. The audience at the Eranos lectures – the speakers and the European intellectuals

⁴⁵ ELIADE, *Portugal Journal*, éd. S. Alexandrescu, translated by M. ZAMFIR, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2006, vol. I, p. 235. The same idea reverberates in Eliade's Eranos lecture delivered in 1958, « La coincidentia oppositorum et le mystère de la totalité », printed in *Eranos-Yahrbuch*, 1959, vol. XXVII, pp. 195-236. Compare to the locution « l'intégrité primordiale » found in Eugene Ionesco's play *Rhinocéros*, Paris, Gallimard, 1959), p. 159, as a form of sarcastic remark at Eliade's address. See also IDEL, *Mircea Eliade*, p. 209.

⁴⁶ On orgy as a means to Eliade's own search for equilibrium see also elsewhere in his *Portugal Journal*, vol. I, p. 126.

⁴⁷ See IDEL, *Mircea Eliade*, pp. 256, 270.

⁴⁸ For more on this topic see my « Mystique juive et histoire juive », *Annales* 5 (1994), pp. 1223-1240.

⁴⁹ See my « Archetypes and Androgynes at Eranos », in *Eranos: Its Magical Past and Alluring Future* (= *Spring* 92 [2015]), pp. 191-208.

who could afford to participate as listeners – was ideal for someone who did his advanced studies in German and Swiss universities. Also, access to the Bollingen Foundation series of books at Princeton University, though somewhat later, was not a small issue in those years.

I would distinguish rather sharply between Corbin and Eliade, on one hand, and Scholem on the other, especially in what regards their attitude towards esotericism or perennialism. While the two embraced it, each in his way, Scholem distanced himself openly from it from the very beginning of his career⁵⁰. A more mature scholar than Corbin and Eliade, at the time of his first arrival to Ascona, in 1949, Scholem had already the fundamental directions of his scholarship, both historiographically and phenomenologically, in full-fledged books, and especially in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Attempting to derive his scholarship from his participation to the Eranos encounters is rather problematic. A comparison between his Hebrew short book *Reshit ha-Qabbalah*, on the beginning of Kabbalah, printed in 1948, before he was invited to Eranos, and his much larger German version, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, accomplished in 1962, will easily demonstrate it.

The metaphysical picture for Scholem is much vaguer, however, and less important in the economy of his scholarship than in the cases of the other two scholars. Unlike Eliade, Scholem was a Hegelian thinker who attributed to Gnosticism a central role in the emergence of Kabbalah and of its phenomenology – and here his position differed from Corbin's strong Neoplatonic propensities. For him⁵¹, Kabbalah expresses a metaphysical reality that can be grasped by proper hermeneutics, using historical, philological, and philosophical tools⁵². By decoding the symbols and discerning the lines of historical development of key concepts together with meticulous bio-bibliographical work, he attempted to approach the « mountain », namely, the core of that reality. He waited, as he himself confessed, to receive a hint coming from that core⁵³. Early in his life, he engaged in exercises based on Abraham Abulafia's mystical techniques, as he recorded shortly before his death solely in the Hebrew version of his autobiography⁵⁴.

What seems undeniable, however, is his conviction that Kabbalah may be a discipline that encompasses both the quest of Kabbalists for the Divine and, seemingly, also their response to what they considered to be their contact with it. It is hard to describe Scholem's own exact views on the relationship between these two subjects: the metaphysical core of Kabbalah and the « mountain », the core of reality. At least as far as the latter is concerned, however, he was apparently certain that academic research falls short of clarifying it. Was he of the same opinion regarding the inadequacy of these approaches to attain the metaphysical core of the Kabbalah?

These personal confessions may reveal his recognition that the scholarly approach has its limits; by transcending it through spiritual orientations, the scholar can be saved from academic aridity, presumably by practicing some mode of spiritual experience. Thus, Scholem may be considered as a *theoretical mystic* or a mystic in theory, as well as a theorist of Kabbalah. My use of the term *theoretical mystic* attempts neither a pejorative nor a positive evaluation. The common perceptions of his personality either solely as a historian or as a historiosopher unnecessarily

⁵⁰ GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, translated by HARRY ZOHAN, Philadelphia, Paul Dry Books, 2012, pp. 131, 136, 142, 146-148, 172.

⁵¹ Here and in the following two paragraphs I draw from my *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 5-6, 12.

⁵² See Scholem's early text printed by DAVID BIALE, *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982, pp. 31, 155.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ See his expanded version of his memoirs, *Mi-Berlin li-Yerushalayim*, Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1982, p. 161 (in Hebrew).

reduce his spiritual physiognomy to his obvious and manifest activity, blatantly ignoring his own statements. Extraordinarily successful as Scholem was as a historian of mystical texts and ideas, he was, in his own eyes, rather a failure *qua* mystic, yet one who longed for a mystical experience.

The gist of his academic *œuvre* and its reception do not depend on Eranos and the companions he encountered at Ascona, and it is hard to pinpoint cross-pollination between them⁵⁵. The claim that Corbin, Eliade, and Scholem made a more phenomenologically homogenous group that acted together at Ascona requires accepting the myth of Eranos as it was disseminated by some of its participants⁵⁶.

Some Conclusions

I have expatiated above on the way religion and Kabbalah were understood in European culture and scholarship, since they constituted, in some ways, one of the matrices of Eranos, already before the three scholars discussed here arrived to the town of Ascona. Corbin cites the depiction of the creative imagination in the Renaissance as a major confirmation of his view drawn from Sufi texts⁵⁷. Eliade envisioned his project as an enhanced « new humanism », reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance⁵⁸. Scholem once depicted himself as a *Reuchlin redivivus*, « eine Art Reinkarnation Johannes Reuchlins », considering the latter's contribution to scholarship in Jewish matters⁵⁹.

Why were only scholars of Jewish mysticism invited to lecture at Ascona and not scholars of Judaism, specializing, for example, in the fields of Talmud, Midrash, or Jewish philosophy? The list of Jewish participants representing Judaism is quite long but homogenous: Leo Baeck, a Rabbi; Martin Buber, a dialogical philosopher; Gershom Scholem; R. J. Zwi Werblowsky; Joseph Weiss; and, much later, myself. Erich Neumann, who was interested in Hasidism, and even wrote on Jewish mysticism from time to time, although much later, was present there as an Jungian analyst. Jung was close to some Jewish figures, such as Siegmund Hurwitz and Rivka Scharf-Kluger, who were acquainted with some aspects of Jewish mysticism. While Baeck was a reform Rabbi interested in Jewish mysticism and Buber was disdainful of the Rabbinic tradition, Scholem's project was to find out the hidden power that saved Judaism throughout its history – in his opinion the mystical tradition, and he spoke about the « hypertrophy » of Rabbinic rituals⁶⁰ – and his approach was largely adopted by his students, Werblowsky and Weiss as well as others.

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⁵⁵ Compare to Wasserstrom's unwarranted claim that Scholem's scholarship had been helped by Eliade and Corbin in WASSERSTROM, *Religion after Religion*, p. 248. In general, the affinities pointed out by Wasserstrom, between Scholem and Corbin, can be read better as divergences. See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 197-198. The comparison on p. 217 between the shared Romantic vision of symbolism has nothing to do with Eranos, since it is found already in Scholem's much earlier *Major Trends*, pp. 26-27.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., HENRY CORBIN, « The Time of Eranos », in *Eranos, Its Magical Past and Alluring Future*, pp. 213-221.

⁵⁷ CORBIN, *Alone with the Alone*, p. 179.

⁵⁸ IDEL, *Mircea Eliade*, pp. 166-169.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., MOSHE IDEL, Introduction to REUCHLIN, *On the Art of Kabbalah*, pp. xv-xvi, xxii-xxiii; and see also *Id.*, « Zur Funktion von Symbolen bei G.G. Scholem », in S. MOSES, S. WEIGEL éds., *Gershom Scholem, Literatur and Rhetorik*, Köln, Boehlau, 2000, pp. 51-82; *Id.*, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, pp. 83-108; *Id.*, *Kabbala in Italy 1280-1510: A Survey*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 310, and SAVERIO CAMPANINI, « Some Notes on Gershom Scholem and Christian Kabbalah », in JOSEPH DAN éd., *Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), In Memoriam*, vol. II (= *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 21 [2007]), pp. 13-33.

⁶⁰ See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, translated by RALPH MANHEIM, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 120; and IDEL, *Mircea Eliade*, pp. 164-165; and compare to, e.g., my « Rabbinism versus Kabbalism: on G. Scholem's Phenomenology of Judaism », *Modern Judaism* 11 (1991), pp. 281-296; *Id.*, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism*, Los Angeles, Cherub Press, 2005; *Id.*, « Some Remarks on Ritual and Mysticism in Geronese Kabbalah », *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 3 (1993), pp. 111-130.

None of the Eranos Jewish lecturers was an expert in the most influential and by far the most voluminous forms of Jewish literatures, the Rabbinic ones, constituted by various types of commentaries on the Talmud and by the huge amount of books known as the *responsa* literature, namely queries that Jews asked Rabbis about how to behave in moments of uncertainty. Much later, I myself have been invited to lecture several times by Tilo Schabert, certainly not because of my knowledge of Rabbinism. These are clear cases of selective affinities, which create the result through a selection that predetermines it to a certain extent: the reduction of variegated historical forms of life and thought, whose essence is quite evasive, to just one of its manifestations, itself polymorphous, preconceived of as pertinent for comparison. In short, Eranos was not a dialogue between various religions, as it was often times claimed, but solely, and sporadically, a dialogue about a specific dimension of those religions, the mystical one, deemed to be representative and edifying: this was a restrictive pluralism. The complexities of historical forms of Judaism, like those of other religions, were not part of such a dialogue.

Even after this selection, however, the Eranos interpretations of Jewish mystical literature is biased by what I call the « theosophical syndrome » and theologization, an overemphasis of the role of the discussions of the divine map and the intra-divine processes⁶¹. The paramount importance of the rituals in this literature has been attenuated even in Jewish scholarship of Kabbalah, and such an interpretation follows the manner in which some Renaissance Christians adopted and substantially adapted Jewish Kabbalah in what became Christian Kabbalah, as seen above.

What was Eranos after all? In my opinion, it was a cooperation between some idealistic well-intended organizers, which attracted some top scholars in search of a more spiritual approach to religion than the historical one, and who were shaped, to a certain extent, by their own acquaintance with Western esoteric trends in interwar Europe. Moreover, it was a great and important intellectual stimulus for two generations of scholars to prepare serious studies to be presented to a select group of experts, about topics that are important for the study of religion, as I may testify from my experience. Especially important for the field was the sharp accent put on phenomenology of religion. Moreover, the publications disseminated their views to wider audiences, especially due to the volumes of *Eranos Jahrbuch* and the Bollingen Series of books at Princeton University Press.

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61 MOSHE IDEL, « On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship », in YOSSEF SCHWARTZ, VOLKHARD KRECH éds., *Religious Apologetics – Philosophical Argumentation*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2004, pp. 123-173.