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## **HERMES TRISMEGISTUS ESOTERICUS AND ESOTERISANT**

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**Introduction:** Supported by recently published sources that make it possible to rectify the views based on sources and statements previously known and available for research until the fifties, we try to put forward the identity, as well as the ancient and modern historical transformations of a mysteriosophical tradition of Egyptian origin, that arose in the Greco-Roman period.

**Key words:** Hermes Trismegistus, Hermetism, Esotericism.

The "Way of Hermes" as the philosopher Iamblichus of Chalcis called it, and the figure of Hermes/Thoth that prevails together with the writings he sponsored, from the most archaic (*The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* in Armenian and the *Koré Kosmou* (excerpts by J. Stobaeus XXIII), through the Hermetic-Gnostic writings of the NHC VI 4, 5 and 6, and the new interpretation, that following these originals, must be given to the cosmic and antic cosmic treatises on the *Corpus Hermeticum*, is shown as the Egyptian guide, master and inspiration of the Hermetic school, that is, the initiation Hermetic brotherhood.

It has thus been understood by the authors who early assimilated the *Mercurius Termaximus* as the Christian historic-salvific conception, showing it as a distinguished prefiguration (*typos*) of the teaching of the Christ-Logos that is its highest expression (*antitypos*) –Lactantius, Cyril of Alexandria and medieval *Asclepius*-, with the variations of the individual interpretations of the representatives of the Platonic Academy of Florence, moderate at the beginning (Marsilio Ficino) and wider and deeper later (F. Patrizi, A. Steuco), ending with the concordist transformism of L. Lazzarelli and others until it resulted in the *On the Occult Philosophy* of H. Cornelius Agrippa. The divine figure, thus conditioned was an easy prey for the esoterisant (hermeticist) adventures and the traditionalist and pseudo-traditional "adaptations".

## 1. The New Image of Hermetism

A history of hermetism that contains both its inner development and the changes that its image has reflected through the contact with its external interpreters is a task that can be approached at present with the new available documents and the continuous discovery of their sources.

The second half of the 20th century has been rich in this sense, offering material that was unknown and of exceptional quality to be organized in relation with the previous knowledge in chronological order, and to supply an identity characterization of hermetism.

The principal sources are the translation into Armenian of a Greek original of *The Definitions of Hermes Trimegistus to Asclepius* and the three hermetic writings of the Sixth Codice of the Nag Hammadi library, translated from Greek into Coptic.

Based on these original writings, it is possible to reinterpret and order the treatises of the manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum* that came to the Academy of Florence in 1462 and that offered more exegesis difficulties for the scholars due to the internal opposition between the "optimistic" and "pessimistic" treatises regarding the cosmos and man in it, as well as to reorder the remaining excerpts, in special the Fragments by John of Stobi, the Latin translation of the greek *Perfect Discourse* or *Asclepius*, and the testimonies and the references of the ancient authors that developed in a more or less accurate way from the end of the fourth century BC, starting with Hecataeus of Abdera and through Artapanus, Cicero and Philo of Byblos, up to the Christians and gentiles as Clement of Alexandria, Lactantius and Cyril of Alexandria, on one hand, and Iamblichus of Chalcis and Zosimus of Panopolis, on the other. We should also mention the relevance that in this communication channel have the authors in Arabic language that also derive us to books and activities strictly hermetic of the 10th to 12th centuries: Ibn al-Nadîm, Shahrastânî and Suhrawardî.

## 2. Definition

Those new resources coordinated by the historic, religious and philosophic research can give an accurate definition of Hermetism as: «A school of philosophy, the Hermetic school or hermetics community, that is, of those followers and believers

whose inspiration source and axis of traditional communitarian establishment is Hermes Trismegistus, the Hermes or Egyptian Mercurius, that is to say, Thoth».

The definition proposed favors the model of a philosophic association, that is, doctrinal, pious and initiatic of Egyptian origin, socially detectable in hellenistic-ptolemaic times. A philosophical-religious or mysteriosophic Egyptian association because the main aim was the salvific or liberating self-fulfillment of your members through initiatic rites that involve an esoteric doctrine and guide the group behaviour. Besides, its historic roots and beliefs fall within the cosmovisional Egyptian tradition. Initiatic and esoteric association, I have said, because the historic-cultural conditions demanded its representatives to keep tradition, reduce socially and to doctrinally and ritually adopt the esoteric practices of the didactic transmission and the reserved rites. But, according to the flexible communication of the mystery cults of the time, in contact with powerful initiatic organizations, the most outstanding experience for the hermetic believers, has been the contact with the members of Gnostic associations uncontrollably proselytizing. In face of this, the Hermetic organization has undergone changes of speculative and practical nature. These adjustments have been specially attractive for the Neoplatonic philosophers of theurgic orientation, as Iamblichus, or hermetic alchemists, as Zosimus of Panopolis.

### 3. Transformation in Hermetism

In face of the situation described, traumatic for some adherents, Hermetism has reacted from its core, incorporating the valuable and rejecting what damaged its identity. As Hermetism is also a universalist spiritual conception, it has adopted, as Gnosticism, the model of syncretic conformation, as alliance of salvific powers -only that of lower scope than the gnostic pneumatological hermeneutics antinaturalist and anticomic-, because it is the union of myth (perpetuity in time) and history (creation of the cosmos). The public transmission of sources of different sign exempt from communitary control took, however, to unexpected confusions of compilers and copyists. The example of the manuscript *Laurentianus* is the most outstanding proof. The scholar finds something similar in the Gnostic sources that evaded the communitary control that the writers of the great Church read, only that, in this last case, they present an apparent superior plausibility under the illusory identity that the hermeneutics of the underlying heresiologic genre give them. This does not hinder to the Hermetism headed

by the venerable figure, but desacralized, of Hermes Trismegistus, it could be presented as Christian hermetism –even if before it was Gnostic-, subordinated to the Jewish-Christian hermeneutic model of the *syzygia* or married couples under the historic-typological figure (*typos*) and the counterfigure (*antitypos*). This other interpretation emerging from Christian universalism, observed the borders of Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages nourishing it with cultural resources, but also nourishing the hope for a Catholic reform that could avoid the breach of Christianity, and the fantasies of a religious Occident leading to esotericism and metaphysically degraded by the subordination of intellection and faith to will, reason and desacralising feeling. In between the Islam, another universalist religion, has adopted alluvially hermetism combining integral hermetic ideas, hermetico-gnostic, neoplatonic, biblic and iranian and fertilizing with all this wealth to the Christian hermetic thought of Occident through its Latin versions. Somewhat in the fringe, the Jewish Kabbalah has contributed with inspirations of universal concordism within wider combinations.

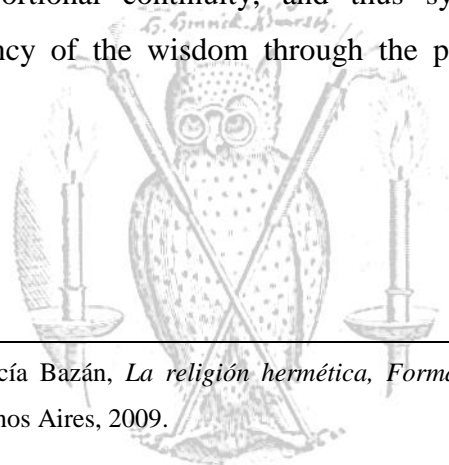
#### 4. The Hermetic Teachings

In brief, however, Hermetism doctrinal and soterically supports the following notes in direct line with the ancient Egyptian conceptions adapted to the esoteric model of transmission and conservation:

1°. The source of knowledge of the real is not man, but the divine revelation because the superior or transcendent can only be known through the message coming from above, of the free divine initiative (*Koré Kosmou* or *Pupil of World-*, at the beginning), given as holy scripture. Thus happened with the manifestation of the cosmos through the creative activity of the Creator and with the molding crafty and alchemical of the souls and the bodies. This principle of the origin is underlain by the apocalyptic conviction and the manifest power of transformation of the sacred and its crystallizations proper to the Egyptian religion<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The Scriptures are an immediate and materialized aspect of the above mentioned divine will. The letters and inscriptions originated in the gods are sacred. The symbols of the intelligible, the world of the Creator that claims the interpretative mediation of language, discourse that is inseparable from the intellect (*teleiós lógos*), whose mediator and supporter is the messenger and interpreter par excellence, Hermes. Guarantee of correct delivery and conservation who consistently establishes the criteria of maintenance of the transmitted: low number corporately qualified, continuity and continuous delivery. For this subject

2° The message Hermes receives from the divine sphere, sometimes through mediators of unquestionable qualifications: Agathodaimon, Poimandres, has a unique content that involves three instances; God, the world and man exist. None of these realities can be get mixed. Besides, God is eternal, immortal, uncreated and creator. For that reason he can be characterized as "one alone", that is, one and unique. An individual nature not comparable with the other two mentioned that raise from his power and creative thought. And "motionless Monad" because as origin of the intelligible world and himself intelligible world, everything comes from him without exhausting him<sup>2</sup>. The world, however, was born through an act of creative will of the power of God separating it from chaos, so, it does not die, because then the divine will would be limited and disorder would overwhelm the divine will. It is a perfect living order whose principle of inner life and its heavenly, physical and material embodiment keep a decreasing proportional continuity, and thus sympathetic, base of the development and efficiency of the wisdom through the practice of occult sciences.



and the following cfr. F. García Bazán, *La religión hermética, Formación e historia de un culto de misterios egipcio*, Lumen, Buenos Aires, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> This continuity, inner unlimited circulation and infinite fertility appropriately illustrate the first two definitions of the divine Being as has been underlined although Christianized, of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*: I. *Deus est monas monadem gignens...* and II.: *Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam*. That is, God is the One from whom derive the simultaneous totality of the intelligible numerical units, concept that requires that in the conceptuality of quantity, the numbers be indefinitely growing and finitely divisible and the extended magnitudes be indefinitely divisible and finitely growing. The second illustrative definition: a one that is "one-all" and that if it includes all the aspects at the same time, as a whole at the same time, it is not possible that the aspects exclude or limit themselves, because they would not be totalities and the whole would not be the all. Full intensity, that is God, and for this reason, sphere in which the center and the circumference coexist. As it happens with the concentrated thought that revolves around itself without expanding. In this, as in many other topics, intuition is hermetic, but its explanatory extension is platonic-pythagoreanizing. It is the continuous hermeneutics of the philosophic and pious schools of the Hellenistic era and after that the Greco-Roman: Neopythagoreans, Platonic-Pythagoreanizings, Gnostics and Hermetics.

Though chaos keeps within the limits imposed by the created order, as the snake Apophis is out of the way<sup>3</sup>. The world can, however, suffer the human affronts<sup>4</sup>.

But the cosmic immortality keeps distance from the tumultuous chaos and is symbolized by the coiled up snake devouring its own tail, the Ouroboros<sup>5</sup>.

Man is also a peculiar being created by the will of God Demiurge, though fallen soul in a body. Reasonable soul, that is, with intellect and reason besides a body. According to this, it forms part of what is endowed with life, that is, of all that grows and decreases: as the world -immortal and animated-, the sky and the stars, the animals -animated and with breath- and the plants -that only have breath-.

It must be noted that the reason is the interpreter of the intellect and tells what the intellect wants and teaches, since it can see everything while the senses see by it. He who does not understand the logos lacks intellect, that is why disorder is dumb because it lacks discourse and intellect. The heavenly intellect is only perceived by the man who is the only one capable of seeing the visible and understanding the intelligible. Man is immortal because of the intellect and the reason and mortal because of the body. Man has, therefore, two natures, immortal and mortal and three essences: intelligible, animated and material. But strictly speaking, man is truly "the immortal form of every man", that is, intellect and reasonable soul<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> To see E. Hornung, *Der Eine und die Vielen. Ägyptische Gottesvorstellungen*, Spanish translation by J. García Lenberg, *El Uno y los Múltiples. Concepciones egipcias de la divinidad*, Trotta, Madrid, 1999, 147ff.

<sup>4</sup> To see the *Koré Kosmou*, in F. García Bazán, *La religión hermética*, chap. IV, pp. 63ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. To see Zosimus of Panopolis "On the Omega Letter", in F. García Bazán, *La religión hermética*, chap. III, pp. 54ff..

<sup>6</sup> *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* in Armenian say illustratively: «God is within himself, the world is in God, and man in the world. His (=man) deficiency is ignorance, his plenitude is the knowledge of God» (VII,5), since: «The body increases and reaches perfection due to nature; and soul fills up with Nous. Every man has a body and a soul; but no every soul has Nous. There are two (types of) Nous: the one is divine and the other (belongs to) soul. Nevertheless there are certain men who do not have even that a soul. Who(ever) understands the body, also understands soul; who(ever) understands soul, also (understands) Nous, because the admirable is (a) natural (object) of contemplation: each of the two is seen by means of the other...You have the power of getting free since you have been given everything. Nobody envies you. Everything came into being for you, so that by means of either one (being) or of the whole, you may understand the craftsman. For you have the power of not understanding



3° Finally, how can man put in act a power that levels him with the gods? Deifying, that is, unifying his three essences through the "way of Hermes", path to a knowledge that brings the salvation with the self realization of man in the world and in God. In this deep and complete sense, Hermetism is philosophic and school of philosophy, that is, philosophy as mysteric or mysteriosophic philosophy. Because within its own characteristics, but as the Pythagoreanizing-Platonics that are "more Pythagoreans" (*pythagorikóteron*) -Moderatus of Gades, Eudorus of Alexandria, Nicomachus of Gerasa, Iamblichus of Chalcis- and the Gnostics and as confirmed by the occidental hermetic alchemists (Zosimus of Panopolis) and the orientals (al-Râzî) and the Islamic illuminists (Suhrawardî), the integral conception of philosophy, as a life style, implies two stages: love of wisdom and knowledge of what wisdom is as the science of the true being or of the what it really is<sup>7</sup>.

### 5. Hermetic and Gnostic Treatises

Now, while the *Korê Kosmou* and the *Fragments* of Stobaeus confirm this transparent philosophic vision of reality of mythic-historic character, original of the Egyptian tradition and summarized by the *Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, through the perfectly identifiable treatises in the *Corpus Hermeticum* as gnostics: *Poimandres* (I), the *Krater -The mixing bowl or the monad-* (IV), *That the*

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with your (own) will; you have the power of lacking faith and being misled, so that you understand the contrary of the (real) beings. Man has as much power as the gods. Only man (is) a free living (being), only he has the power of good and evil» (VIII, 4 and 6). To see J.-P. Mahé, in C. Salaman, D. van Oyen & W.D. Wharton, *The Way of Hermes. The Corpus Hermeticum*, Duckworth, London, 1999, 114-115.

<sup>7</sup> The disciple of Ammonius of Hermas, John Philoponus wrote this: «Pythagoras denominated as wisdom (*sophia*) only the science of eternal things and denominated philosophy to the love (*philia*) of this wisdom. This is positively the purpose (*telos*) of philosophy: knowledge (*gnosis*) of the divine facts (*theion pragmaton*)», in *Nicomachi isagogen Arithmetica Scholia* in U. Wilckens, voice *sophia*, ThWzNT, VII, 475. Two steps: gnosis and perfect gnosis. But also within this context that is beyond the habitual understanding of philosophy as an intellectually restricted activity or intellectual and contemplative, it offers a twofold sense in the growth represented by the continuity of knowledge that links both steps: a) the knowledge of the empiric contents leads to the knowledge of spiritual content without breaches in reality, going from the outside to the inside that governs it, or, b) the contents of knowledge is always spiritual or pneumatic and gradually liberates from inconsistent illusions that fragment it. Two realizing extremes within the gamut of the same philosophic conception: theurgy and gnosticism.

*good is in God alone and nowhere else* (VI), *That the greatest evil in mankind is ignorance concerning god* (VII), *On being born again* (XIII), the Christian gnostics basing on the hermetic anthropological axis of the breach intellect/body, introduce surreptitiously their own division: *noûs/kosmos*<sup>8</sup>.

And the reasons presented are what lets us distinguish a series of ideas that are more gnostic than hermetic in the above mentioned treatises and that due to the ambiguity tend to confuse the interpreters<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> They do not consider the unitary and properly hermetic bloc constituted by intellect/soul or logos, the later being an intermediate essence that participates in both natures: incorporeal and corporeal, a mixed essence that communicates the will and the divine thought –intellect- with the non rational corporeal structure and according to this with the tendency to one or another sense attaining a higher state or leading to exhaustion, without the presence of the intellect. This essentially mixed character of the rational soul is denied by the Gnostics, and for that reason Plotinus and Porphyre transform the anthropological and cosmological peculiarity of Hermetism with the theory of the “non-descending soul” that always stays in the Intellect, a position that arouse Iamblichus’ critics and rejection in *On the Soul*.

<sup>9</sup> 1° The repetitions on the possession of the knowledge as central point to attain salvation, according to *Poimandres* 21 and 26; the *Krater* 4; *That the good is in God alone and no however else*, 5; *On being born again*, 10; or, on the other hand, ignorance considered as the major evil and equivalent to the body: *That the greatest evil in mankind is ignorance concerning god*, VII, 2; *On being born again*, 7. 2° To consider the Hermetic believer as “alien to the world”: *On being born again* 1; 3. 3° The overcoming of the world through reason and intellect and rejection of the body: the *Krater*, 2; 6; *That the good is in God alone...*, 3. 4° To consider baptism as the equivalent to the immersion in alchemical waters: the *Krater*, 4; 5° A terminology and atmosphere that are of Gnostic configuration and origin: *Poimandres* 1-8; 29-31; *That the greatest evil in mankind is ignorance...*, 1; *On being born again*, complete in comparison with the *Ogdoad reveals the Ennead*. In face of categorical hermetic statements as: «Everything came into being for you, so that by means of either one (being) or of the whole, you may understand the craftsman» (*Definitions*, VIII,6), the doubts sowed by the Gnostic readings should be solved and cleared with the same force. This is what the Anti Gnostic passages show and that can be selected in the different treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*: « [9]There cannot be two makers or more than two...[11] Clearly, there is someone who makes these things, and quite evidently he is one...[12] God makes everything. [In a god who is many you have the ultimate absurdity]» (cfr. XI, 9, 11,12, B.P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 39); «For if you carefully avoid contentious discourse, my child, you will find that mind, the soul of god, truly prevails over all, over fate and law and all else» (X II, 9, ibidem, 45). «[4] There is someone, Tat, who is maker and master of all this... [7] Who made them all? What sort of mother or what sort of father if not the invisible god, who crafted them all by his own will? [8] No one claims that a statue or a picture has been produced unless there is a sculptor or a painter. Has this craftwork been produced without a craftman, then? Oh, how full of blindness, how full of irreverence, how full of ignorance! Tat, my child,



## 6. Hermetism and Hermeticism

This way, a core of Hermetism is depicted that in the rivalry of religions and cultures driven by the historic initiative of Hecataeus of Abdera as spokesman of Ptolemy I Soter in the framework of the *oikoumene* and in which the Babylonian Berossus, Zeno of Rhodes and Manetho among others took part, shows the effort to maintain the identity under the form of extreme resistance of some selective cults. The echos that this attitude produced brought various consequences of external confusion as happened with Hecataeus who wanted to offer a Hermes apt for political-religious promotion; of Artapanus who wanted to profit from the figure of Hermes for the Jewish religion or of Cicero who understood that Hermes/Thoth is Greek<sup>10</sup>.

The following phase of appropriation will be Christian; Gnostic first, Catholic later and finally esoterisant at the beginning of the modern period. Teurgists and alchemists, though to a lesser degree, nourished from the same ambiguities. A thesis remains; that of the sacred figure of Hermes Trismegistus/Thoth supported during milleniums in different religious contexts, although there are a few testimonies that have kept a limpid image of it: John Stobaeus and the *Defintions of Hermes Trsimegistus to Asclepius*. The rest, with the best of intentions has combined the gold of spirituality of a

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never deprive the craftworks of their craftman...Or rather, he is stronger even [than a name used of god,] so great is the father of all. Surely it is he alone whose work it is to be a father» (V,4,7,8, ibidem, 19-20). «Reverence is knowledge of god, and one who has come to know god, filled with all good things, has thoughts that are divine and not like those of the multitude. This is why those who are in knowledge do not please the multitude, nor does the multitude please them. They appear to be mad...As I have said, vice must dwell here below since this is its native land. The earth is its native land, not the cosmos, as some will blasphemously claim» (IX,4, ibidem, 28). «You need not be on guard against the diversity of things that come to be, fearing to attach something low and inglorious to god. God's glory is one, that he makes all things, and this making is like the body of god. There is nothing evil or shameful about the maker himself; such conditions are immediate consequences of generation, like corrosion on bronze or dirt on the body. The bronzesmith did not make the corrosion; the parents did not make the dirt; nor did god make evil»(XIV,7, ibidem, 56) –the Greek text is of D. Nock-A.N.J. Festugière, *Corpus Hermeticum*, the English translation of Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 1992 (reprint 1997).

<sup>10</sup> *De nat. deorum* III, 56.

way of liberation with the bargain of the strange, making up the long history of Hermetism and hermetizations of Hermes Trimegistus<sup>11</sup>.



<sup>11</sup> Cfr. F. García Bazán, *La religión hermética*, Chap. V, pp. 69ff., concerning to the new renacentist and modern stage in the history and transformations of Hermetism in Platonic Academy of Florence, M. Ficinus, G.G. Plethon and the links between Hermetism and philosophia perennis.