FIDELE SIGNACULUM

ÍRÁSOK SZŐNYI GYÖRGY ENDRE TISZTELETÉRE
WRITINGS IN HONOUR OF GYÖRGY ENDRE SZŐNYI

Szerkesztette / Edited by
Kiss Attila,
Matuska Ágnes,
Péter Róbert

NEC ASPERA TERRENT

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Írások Szőnyi György Endre tiszteletére
Writings in Honour of György Endre Szőnyi

Szeged 2022

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KISS ATTILA, MATUSKA ÁGNES, PÉTER RÓBERT

Tördelés és grafika
SZŐNYI ETELKA

A borító az ünnepelt saját fotójának felhasználásával készült.

Olvasószerkesztő (jegyzetek):
BUCSICS KATALIN és SZARVAS RÉKA

Kiadja
a Szegedi Tudományegyetem / University of Szeged
Bölcsészet- és Társadalomtudományi Kar / Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Angol-Amerikai Intézet / Institute of English and American Studies

ISBN 978-963-306-906-6 (pdf)

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Omnis mundi creatura
quasi liber et pictura
nobis est, et speculum.
Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,
nostri status, nostrae sortis
fidele signaculum.

Alanus ab Insulis

TARTALOMJEGYZÉK / TABLE OF CONTENTS

Kiss Attila, Matuska Ágnes, Péter Róbert
Előszó – a hetvenéves Szőnyi György Endre „pecsétjei” / Foreword – seventy years of “seals” 17

Almási Zsolt
Hamlet félresiklott színházi kísérlete? Egy mondat fordítás- és tudománytörténeti kontextusban 21

Amira Aloui
Early Modern Political Thought: From Civil Reason to Reason of State 27

Iren Annus
Multimediality and the Narrative Artwork of Faith Ringgold 37

Árvay Anett
Nyelv – kultúra – meg(nem)értés 49

Jan Bäcklund
Entomopolis, Contemporary Art, and John Dee 63

Barbara Baert
Kairos and the Annunciation. Incarnation and the Critical Moment 81

Marianna D. Birnbaum
Fathers and Daughters; Contemplating Filial Conduct (an Outline) 101

Borus György
Az angol–skót unió 315. évfordulójára 113

Fernando Cioni
Refashioning Italian Theatrical and Dramatic Conventions: Prologues, Epilogues, and Inductions in Early Modern English Drama 125

Sabine Coelsch-Foisner
The Raft of the Medusa – One of Europe's Greatest Humanitarian Catastrophes through a Transmedial Lens 155

Zoltán Cora
From Rhetoric to Psychology: the Metamorphosis of the Sublime in Eighteenth-Century British Literary Aesthetics (1700–1740) 177

Réka M. Cristian
Negotiated Films: Alberto A. Isaac's *Mujeres Insumisas* and Julie Taymor's *Frida* 197

Cseicsner Otília
Látvány vagy látomás? A Magyar Rádió Shakespeare: *A vihar*-adaptációi 207

Korinna Csetényi
Reading the Monstrous Female in Stephen King 231

Clifford Davidson
This is How the World Ends: Two Examples of a Medieval Topos 249

Deák Ágnes
Kulturális reprezentáció a politika árnyékában, 1861–1865 259

Dobos Csilla
Gondolatok az emlékezésről 273

Zoltán Dragon
Jazzing the Image: Haptic Photography in the Swirl of Melodies 283

Tibor Fabiny
Worms: Their Diets and Dramas in *Hamlet* and Luther. 293

Fazekas Sándor
“My love is as a fever” Testi és lelki betegségek a *Szonettek*ben 311

György Fogarasi
On Slopes: Danger, Disguise, and the Fading Outlines of War 329

Földváry Kinga
Királyok és koronák: hatalmi ikonok a *Koronák harca* BBC-sorozatban 343

Khanim Garayeva
Transcendental Disposition of Time in Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor* (1985) 355

George Gömöri
A Restoration Career in London: Paul P. Jászberényi 365

Endre Hárs
How to Build a Utopian Library. Ludwig Hevesi (1843–1910) as Collector and Commentator of Fantastic Literature 371

Karolina Maria Hess, Małgorzata Alicja Biały
From Poland with Love. Dimensions of Feeling in the Interwar Esoteric Reflection 387

Lisa Hopkins
Witchcraft, Magic and the Esoteric in the Works of the Cavendish Family 401

Gyöngyvér Horváth
“Though changed herself, preserves her love unchanged.” Narration Through Body Language in Early Modern Illustrated Editions of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 411

Gerhard Jaritz
Constructing Good and Bad “Others” in Context-bound Late Medieval Visual Culture 431

Kérchy Anna
A nonszenszikonotext poétikája és politikája a Carroll-Tenniel kooperáció tükrében ... 443

Kiséry András
Ki írta Shakespeare-t? ... 461

Gábor Klaniczay
The Body as Image of the Suffering Christ ... 481

Kontler László
Földrengés, felvilágosodás és világvége: gondolatok az utolsó ítéletről, 1686–1756 ... 505

Lilla Kopár
Strategies of Visual Storytelling: Sigurd the Dragon-slayer at Ramsundsberget, Sweden. A Case Study ... 525

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács
Cultural Continuity in Museum Space: The Cesnola Collection of the Met in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* ... 539

Kökény Andrea
A civil társadalom szerepe a vadnyugaton ... 549

Katalin Kürtösi
"more of seals" – Inuit-representations in *The Tragedy of Man* ... 563

Eszter Láncos
"Within her bosom it shall dwell" – Remembrance and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* ... 571

Sir Robert Lima †
Vox Dei: the Pre-conscious World – Mind in the Works of Julian Jaynes and Ramón Del Valle-inclán ... 587

Lovizer Lilla
Adalékok a Pope-Theobald vitához. A korai Shakespeare-kiadások Vergilius-paratextusai 595

Zenón Luis-Martínez
Currents Turned Awry: Aposiopesis, Predestination and the *Trauerspiel* of *Hamlet* 611

Csaba Maczelka
Jakob Boehme, Thomas Tryon, and the Spiritual Foundations of Seventeenth-century Ethical Vegetarianism 627

Máté-Tóth András
Varázstalanítás és ami utána következik. A vallás értelmezése a bizonytalanság világában 641

Mike Laura
Kollektív trauma és mártírok a kora modern angol bosszútragédiában 649

Mikola Gyöngyi
A történelmi fikció problémája Guzel Jahina regényeiben 661

Orsolya Milián
"We Are Watching the Photograph": Péter Farkas's Ekphrasis of James Nachtwey's Iconic Press Photograph 671

W. J. T. Mitchell
The Biocybernetic Forest. Max de Esteban, AI, and the Iconology of Thinking . . 687

Molnár Dávid
A bakfarki furor: Bakfark Bálint 1565-ös krakkói lantkönyvének platonikus előszava 697

Orosz Magdolna
Apák és fiúk – családtörténetek. Történelmi traumák és emlékezés a kortárs osztrák és magyar irodalomban 709

Pál József
Transzcendentális geometriától az aggastyánig. Az Atya alakja a *Commediá*ban és a Sixtus-kápolnában 727

Pálfi Ágnes
Shakespeare *Hamlet*je Máté Oroszlán-evangéliumának fényében 743

Leigh Ian Travis Penman – Szentpéteri Márton
A rózsakeresztes mátrix. Adalékok Szerb Antal *A Pendragon-legenda* című regényének filológiai hátteréhez 765

Péti Miklós
Néhány megjegyzés Szabó Lőrinc *Elveszett Paradicsom* fordítás-töredékeiről . . 813

Petrőczi Éva
Sábát Anatevkában 819

Natália Pikli
Wither and Women: Gendering and Personalizing the Emblem 821

Rafał T. Prinke
The Polish Brethren's Encounters with John Dee and Edward Kelley in Cracow 837

Noel Putnik
Agrippa’s Magical Piety and the Insufficiency of the Revelation 849

Nemanja Radulović
Miguel Serrano’s Diplomatic Mission in Communist Yugoslavia 867

Matthias Riedl
Intelligentia spiritualis: Apocalyptic Knowledge and the Secret of Revolution . . 879

Veronika Schandl
Presence in Absence. Gender Dynamics in Recent Hungarian Appropriations of Shakespeare's *King Lear* 895

Marcell Sebők
"Was he not with you? What on earth does he do?" A Brief Overview on the Possibility of an Encounter between John Dee and Andreas Dudith 905

Peter Sherwood
Reflections on Aggregation and Animacy as Categories in the Teaching of Hungarian as a Foreign Language (THFL) 911

Anikó Sohár
The Translator's Burden: *Good Omens* in Hungarian 923

Erzsébet Stróbl
Re-Writing and Re-Believing Our Histories: Queen Elizabeth I in Ella Hickson's *Swive [Elizabeth]* 931

Thomas Swick
My Friend Gyuri 939

Sz. Kristóf Ildikó
Rózsi néni története, avagy hogyan születik az antropológus? (Ego-történet) . . 943

Alessandra Tarabochia
"Children" of the Planets. Active and Contemplative Life in 15th Century Florence 951

Zsófia Anna Tóth
Jane Austen, the Humourist 959

Újvári Edit
Botticelli Venusai – ikonográfiai és ikonikai konnotációk 971

Zoltán Vajda
Thomas Jefferson and the Moral Power of William Shakespeare 993

Marina Vicelja-Matijašić
The Image of Christ in the Second Millennium between Convention and Narcissism 1003

Éva Vígh
The Zoomorphic Physiognomy of Giovan Battista Della Porta 1017

Voigt Vilmos
A mágyiás ezer plusz egy mester 1033

Carsten L. Wilke
The Allegorical Mistress: Visionary Literature as a Cross-Confessional Genre in Medieval and Early Modern Spain 1039

Thomas Willard
From Dee's "Hieroglyphic Monad" to Andreae's "Chemical Wedding": Re-reading Frances Yates 1061

Rowland Wymer
Representing the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Literature and Film 1077

AGRIPPA'S MAGICAL PIETY AND THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE REVELATION

NOEL PUTNIK

In his discussion on the main traits of John Dee's theology, György E. Szőnyi writes that "it centered on Dee's deep admiration for the work of Creation and its Maker."[1] He further points out that the English Doctor "never seems to have been shaken in his belief that man was privileged to become finally a partner of God, sharing his knowledge and his creative energies." Szőnyi's analysis of Dee's magical beliefs and practices, as well as of his theological convictions, focuses on the notion of exaltation, which can be understood as a sort of spiritual ascension in the specific intellectual and cultural context of Renaissance humanism. However, the very idea of exaltation as developed by John Dee appears to be highly ambiguous in terms of Christian ethics: while deeply grounded in piety and religious enthusiasm, it bears clear Pelagian and theurgic marks from the viewpoint of mainstream Christian theology, Catholic and Protestant alike.[2]

Within this conceptual framework, Szőnyi discusses the emergence of a peculiar type of esoterically-minded humanists, who tended to propagate "a new, universalist Christian church, which aimed at a position above and beyond the rivalling denominations."[3] Religious syncretism and, in Dee's time, the so-called interconfessionalism were among the principal distinctive features of this type of humanists. Amid a great variety of such scholars, Szőnyi pays a closer attention to several notable predecessors of John Dee, including Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, Paracelsus, and Francesco Giorgi.

Among these, Szőnyi devotes a considerable part of his analysis to Agrippa, John Dee's great role model, whose work and thought show some striking similarities to Dee's. For instance, Agrippa's *magia naturalis* links theological magic with the new, rising, natural sciences; he discusses the angelic languages at great length and accepts the higher intelligences or *daemones* as necessary intermediaries in magical operation; he views theological or invocational magic as the highest type of magic; his philosophical thought is deeply pervaded by the idea of exaltation and spiritual rebirth.[4] What strikes the reader in Szőnyi's comparison between Agrippa and Dee is his conclusion that both were gravely hindered by the problem of *discretio spirituum,* as foreshadowed by the example of the arch-gnostic Simon Magus.[5] Just like the archetypal narrative of Simon Magus, Agrippa's (and, subsequently, Dee's) thought "embraced the dangerous borderline between holy *exaltatio* and arrogant conceit. Agrippa's work, then, subverted itself."[6] I intend to revisit this old problem and use Szőnyi's argument as a starting point for my own reconsideration of the relationship between magic and Christian piety in Agrippa. *Mutatis mutandis,* the results of my analysis could be applied to John Dee and some other Renaissance seekers of *exaltatio* as well.

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[1] György E. Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation Through Powerful Signs* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 217.

[2] Ibid., 270–80. "John Dee's intentions in his magical operations [...] were entirely pious", he remarks. "[H]e was striving toward a mystical union with God" (Ibid., 270). This was recognized even by Dee's fierce critic Meric Casaubon. However, Casaubon added that Dee's only error had been "that he mistook false lying Spirits for Angels of Light, the Divel of Hell for the God of Heaven" (Ibid., 275).

[3] Ibid., 227.

THE AGRIPPAN QUESTION

In addition to the old interpretive dilemma concerning Cornelius Agrippa's "skepticism" versus his "credulity", a more recent divergence in scholarship is based on the widespread perception of a sharp division between magic and Christian piety as the two pillars of Agrippa's thought. Some scholars choose to approach him primarily as a theoretician of magic, even though his works abound in theological thinking.[7] Conversely, others tend to view Agrippa in more religious (that is, Christian) terms, with the tendency to downplay the esoteric component of his thought. This current of scholarship often puts significant emphasis on Agrippa's role as a humanist opposed to the social and doctrinal misdoings and moral degeneration of the Roman Church.[8] The former are inclined to see Agrippa's magical doctrines, to use D. P. Walker's words, as "obviously incompatible with

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[4] Ibid., 110–31. For more on this idea in Agrippa see my works *The Pious Impiety of Agrippa's Magic: Two Conflicting Notions of Ascension in the Works of Cornelius Agrippa* (Saarbruücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010) and "Agrippa's Cosmic Ladder: Building a World with Words in the *De Occulta Philosophia,*" in Peter J. Forshaw, ed., *Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 81–102.

[5] Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism,* 130–31.

[6] Ibid., 131.

[7] Much in tune with D. P. Walker, this is how Agrippa has been viewed by scholars such as Michael E. Keefer, Frank L. Borchardt, and Szőnyi himself.

[8] Paola Zambelli, Vittoria Perrone Compagni, and Marc van der Poel are the important present-day advocates of this approach.

Christianity",[9] which is certainly not a novelty in scholarship. The latter, however, appear to be moving toward a curious "Christianization" of the German occultist, which is a relatively new development. Such a dichotomy is due to a good reason: the problem has always been how to relate these two facets of Agrippa's thought, his openly heterodox magical beliefs and his seemingly orthodox creed. In a world of inherited cultural paradigms and doctrinal compartments there could be no such thing as a "pious Christian magician." It appears that the image of Simon Magus, looming menacingly behind any such idea, set the ultimate criteria for distinguishing piety from impiety in the large part of the Western cultural and religious consciousness.[10] From various points of view, the "pious Christian magician" remains a contested notion. What might strike one in this oxymoron are not the common opposites of "Christian" and "magical", but rather the plurality of meanings that could be ascribed to the seemingly self-explanatory adjective "pious."

Thus, a more detailed examination of Agrippa's views on the true nature of piety might shed some additional light on this murky area of the intermingled modes of spirituality. It could also provide a more nuanced insight into Agrippa's understanding (or various *registers* of understanding) of categories such as "magical", "demonic", "orthodox", or, for that matter, "Christian" itself.[11]

As already mentioned, the hypotheses and scholarly positions concerning the "Agrippan question" are often based on – or at least heavily influenced by – the underlying assumption of *mutual exclusiveness* between the intellectual paradigms in question. In other words, they operate with the clearly distinct categories of "(Neo)Platonic", "Hermetic", "magical" (that is, "pagan" or "unorthodox") versus "Christian" and "orthodox." In their extreme, they presume a sharp incompatibility or even irreconcilable enmity between the spiritual traditions indicated or implied by these labels.

However, the apodictic claims of incompatibility appear to be insufficient to fully account for syncretists like Agrippa, who – contrary to Georgios Gemistos Plethon, for instance – cherished fervent Christian convictions and did not even consider fully replacing them with “something better.”[12] Should one be content with the bare conclusion that Agrippa was a victim of grave illusions concerning the prospects of his attempted synthesis? In the perspective of religious pluralism and hybrid identities that marked the era of Renaissance humanism, the answer is certainly no. When speaking of Christian Neoplatonists, Christian Hermetists, Christian Kabbalists and the like, the problem boils down to a simple but daunting question: What is it that makes one experience what I term “the insufficiency of the revelation?”[13] In other words, what makes one’s religious experience “worn-out”, devoid of its necessary *mysterium tremendum?* Finally, what is it that makes one feel entitled to or capable of “enriching” it?[14] And how far can one go in this process of enriching and still consider oneself a true adherent to the same creed?

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[9] D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic From Ficino to Campanella* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1958), 85.

[10] One of the best expressions of this attitude is Michael Keefer's influential essay "Agrippa's Dilemma: Hermetic 'Rebirth' and the Ambivalences of *De vanitate* and *De occulta philosophia," Rennaisance Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1991): 614–53.

[11] One might call to mind the exceptionally useful analytical concept of "micro-Christendoms" introduced by Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A. D. 200–1000* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 13–7, 355–379. It inspires possible new ways of conceptualizing various "Christianities" or "Christian identities" in Agrippa's time.

CONTESTED NOTIONS OF PIETY

As is well known, Agrippa’s pivotal work on magic, the *De occulta philosophia,* abounds in references to the Bible and the great theologians of the early and medieval Church.[15] One of the most frequently cited Church authorities is the Apostle Paul. Among numerous references to him, one merits particular attention: “Therefore those who are more religiously instructed do not undertake even the smallest work without divine invocation, as the Doctor of Nations commands in Colossians saying: *Whatever you shall do in word*

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[12] On Plethon’s call for the abandonment of Christianity and return to the Greek Olympian gods, interpreted through Zoroastrianism as a sort of new universal religion, see Niketas Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 163–326.

[13] As opposed to any other notion or tradition of divine revelation, the term “revelation” used here refers strictly to Christ’s theophany as narrated in the New Testament.

[14] Two striking examples can illustrate my point. In his small treatise titled *Dehortatio gentilis theologiae* (A Dissuasion Against Pagan Theology) Agrippa speaks about cleaning up the pagan literature until it fits into Christian learning so that it can “*enrich* the Church of God” *(ecclesiam Dei locupletare);* quoted and translated by Marc van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and his Declamations* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 25. The second example: in his famous Kabbalistic conclusions Pico della Mirandola ascertains that “no science offers greater *assurance of Christ’s divinity* than magic and the cabala” *(Nulla est scientia, quae nos magis certificet de diuinitate Christi, quam Magia & Cabala);* quoted and translated by Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1972), 16.

[15] On Agrippa’s frequent use and re-contextualizing of scriptural authorities see my work “To Be Born (Again) from God: Scriptural Obscurity as a Theological Way Out for Cornelius Agrippa,” in Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider, and Alessandro Zironi, eds., *Obscurity in Medieval Texts* (Krems: Medium Aevum Quotidianum, 2013), 145–56.

or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ giving thanks to God the Father through him."[16]

The problem with this seemingly orthodox reference to Paul is that it appears in a chapter instructing the reader how to prepare for practicing ritual magic! Agrippa apparently takes the Apostle's words literally and supports his own call for practicing a forbidden art with the strongest possible scriptural authority. How to interpret this and many similar passages in the *De occulta philsophia?* Is it possible that Agrippa was simply unaware of the attitude of mainstream theology toward ritual magic? Certainly not; in his time the German humanist was almost universally acclaimed for his knowledge and wide erudition.[17] Moreover, assuming that cases like this can be explained away by "accusing" Agrippa of theological "cherry-picking" common to Renaissance eclectics would be an oversimplification. In my view, his occasional practice of re-contextualizing the scriptural sources should not be understood as an act of conscious intellectual "cheating", whereby the cautious reader would be lured into accepting Agrippa's unorthodox teachings just because they are replete with scriptural references. Instead, I suggest that behind such paradoxical statements lies a peculiar understanding of piety, which in some aspects matches the traditional Christian notion of piety, whereas in some others differs from it significantly. Most importantly, I argue that Agrippa regarded his own understanding of piety as profoundly *Christian* in the sense in which he must have understood that designation.

At least since Plato and his *Euthyphro,* there has been some recognition of the fact that piety is not a monolithic, readily definable category. Socrates' attempts to find a universally true definition lead to a loose conclusion that piety is a form of justice, but he fails to explain how exactly it differs from other forms of justice. On the other side, Socrates is not satisfied with Euthyphro's definition of piety as that which is pleasing to the gods, since the gods might disagree among themselves as to what is pleasing.[18] Translated into modern terms, piety is a complex and flexible notion based on a number of cultural, societal, theological, and other concerns that change over time. A good example of its complexity is the phenomenon of sacred prostitution in the temple of Aphrodite in ancient Corinth. The worshippers of the goddess of love undoubtedly regarded their practice as pious, even though many traditional Christians would find it abominable or at least unacceptable.

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[16] Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy,* trans. James Freake, ed. Donald Tyson (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), 450, italics in the translation mine. The reference is to Col. 3:17. For the original passage see Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres,* ed. Vittoria Perrone Compagni (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 409. Henceforth, for the sake of brevity, I will not provide the original texts in detail, but I will refer to their sources.

[17] See, for instance, Charles G. Nauert Jr., *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 1–8; 116–56.

[18] *Euth.* 10a1–11b5, 11e2–1234, in Plato, *Euthyphro & Clitophon,* commentary and introd. Jacques A. Bailly (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2003), 77–85, 89–97.

In most general terms, piety can be construed as the observance of religion communally, in public (such as attending religious rites or going to pilgrimages), but this aspect of piety is to a large extent a cultural and societal category, having to do with social relations and ways of public representation. As an inner category, it can be understood as a strong personal conviction, devotedness, and adherence to a system of religious belief. As such, it is always articulated within a conceptual framework defined by the sacred scriptures of the given religion and their dominant interpretations. This inner aspect of piety has much more to do with theology, i.e. a body of doctrines pertaining to man's origin, position in this world, and relation to God, man's fall and final destiny, and so on. These doctrines then translate into personal convictions and modes of thought and behaviour that one deems appropriate and pleasing to God.

In this sense, the dominant Christian understanding of piety (which is commonly associated with humility) was decisively influenced by the Biblical account of man's fall, in which tasting the fruits from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was directly equated to hubris and disobedience. The serpent persuaded the woman into eating the fruits of that tree by making a subtle point: "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."[19] The *eritis sicut dii* argument proved fatal for the mankind, but it also set the dominant tone of piety in Christianity: trying to become like God is simply impious, it is a repetition of the primeval sin.

However, the Hermetic understanding of piety does not contain such limitations. On the contrary, piety *is precisely defined* in terms of restoring one's divine nature and powers. In the *Pimander,* the first discourse of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* Hermes addresses his master in the following way: "You have taught me all things well, o mind, just as I wanted. But tell me again about *the way up;* tell me how it happens."[20] And Poemandres replies:

> The form you used to have [i. e. the material body] vanishes. [...] The body's senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. [...] Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic

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[19] Gen. 3:5 (The New International Version).

[20] Brian P. Copenhaver, ed. and trans., *Hermetica: The Greek* Corpus Hermeticum *and the Latin* Asclepius *in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5, italics mine. The original passage: *Corpus Hermeticum,* vols. 2, ed. A. D. Nock. trans. A.-J. Festugière (Paris: Société d'édition « *Les belles lettres* », 1945), 1:16.

> framework ... and then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the ogdoad; [...] Those present there rejoice together in his presence, and, having become like his companions, he also hears certain powers that exist beyond the ogdoadic reagion and hymn god with sweet voice. *They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, they enter into god. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god.*[21]

This passage, in which the human being is identified with the inner or essential man (stripped of the material body), reads almost as an inversion of the Biblical account of the fall. Man *is supposed* to gain the divine knowledge and the power that accompanies it; man is supposed to become like God. This is the core of the Hermetic idea of rebirth, which is explicitly identified with salvation: "[N]o one can be saved before being born again."[22]

This is precisely the mode of piety that Agrippa embraces, as clearly demonstrated by his numerous statements in the *De occulta philosophia*. It will suffice to mention two passages. In the first passage Agrippa characterizes the main goal of magic – exaltation – as *entirely pious*: "To conclude, nothing is more pleasant and acceptable to God than a man perfectly pious and truly religious, who so far excels other men as He is distant from the immortal gods. Therefore, we ought, being first purged, to offer and commend ourselves to divine piety and religion."[23]

In the second passage Agrippa defines faith as the only "instrument" by which one can approach God and obtain divine virtues, and he links it directly to magical *operatio*: "By faith man is made somewhat the same with the superior entities and enjoys the same power with them. [...] For faith is the root of all miracles, by which alone (as the Platonists testify) we approach God and obtain the divine protection and power."[24]

These two statements epitomize Agrippa's understanding of piety and faith, which is evidently closer to the Hermetic than to the Christian conceptual framework. When measured against such a criterion, it is not surprising that Agrippa evaluates the spiritual advancement of the prophets and the apostles by their power to perform wonders.[25]

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[21] Copenhaver, *Hermetica,* 5–6; *Corpus Hermeticum,* 1:16, italics in the translation mine.

[22] Copenhaver, *Hermetica,* 49; *Corpus Hermeticum,* 2:200. Note also that, in stark contrast to Christian anthropological monism, the Hermetic notion of piety is informed by radical anthropological dualism.

[23] Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy,* 441; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia,* 402–3. This is a direct reference to Apuleius, *De deo Socratis,* 20.

[24] Agrippa *Occult Philosophy,* 453; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia,* 412–13.

[25] Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy,* 455; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia,* 414.

In this context, the sharp opposition between Simon Magus and the apostle Peter, which Michael Keefer postulates as the main contradiction in Agrippa's synthesis, somewhat loses its momentum and becomes a question of the contested notions of piety.[26] This does not relieve Agrippa's thought of its basic tension, but it does diminish the "demonic" side of it, putting in into a more proper perspective: that of the Hermetic understanding of piety, faith, and religion in general. The same goes for D. P. Walker's characterization of Agrippa's magic as "demonic."[27] What is tacitly built into such assessment is the standard Christian notion of piety, which is taken as the sole criterion for discerning between various types of spiritual attitudes.

Although Agrippa undoubtedly cherished fervent Christian convictions, the fact that his "mode" of Christianity differed significantly from the mainstream raises the question: how exactly did Agrippa construe Christianity? And even more importantly: how did he understand *his own participation* in Christianity? In the following section I propose a hermeneutical model that might help us cope with this problem.

AN EXEGETICAL WAY OUT: TOWARD A TRIPARTITE INTERPRETATION OF CHRISTIANITY

When, following his successful series of public lectures on Reuchlin' *De verbo mirifico* in 1509, Agrippa was violently attacked by the Franciscan Jean Catilinet for being a "judaizing heretic", he replied with equal zeal in his *Expostulatio* [Complaint]: "But I am a Christian, and neither death nor life shall separate me from my faith in Christ, and I prefer the Christian doctors to all other scholars, and yet I do not despise the Jewish rabbis."[28]

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[26] See Keefer, "Agrippa's Dilemma," 645–50; see also Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism,* 128–31. Keefer's analysis of Agrippa's definition of the magician's soul as *anima stans et non cadens* (*De occulta philosophia* III, 44) led him to link it to the pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones* (II, 7), in which Simon Magus is described as someone who wished himself to be called "the Standing One" *(cupidus Stantem nominari).* Since Simon's demonic reputation in Christianity is unquestionable, it taints Agrippa's doctrine of ascension with demonic intentions too. However, Keefer seems to be insufficiently aware of the context in which Agrippa uses this phrase: while he speaks of the upward movement of *ratio* toward *mens* (a process in which, at the very least, the physical body is ignored), pseudo-Clement explains the meaning of the name *Stans* by referring to Simon's physical body. In other words, Agrippa's anthropology is radically different from Simon's. On Agrippa's anthropology see my work "*Operari per fidem:* the Role of Faith in Agrippan Magic", in Fabrizio Conti, ed. *Civilizations of the Supernatural. Witchcraft, Ritual, and Religious Experience in Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Traditions* (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2020), 287–312.

[27] Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic,* 96.

[28] Quoted by Van der Poel, *Agrippa, The Humanist Theologian,* 20; the original passage: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, "Expostulatio cum Ioanne Catilineti super expositione libri Ioannis Capnionis de verbo mirifico," in *Opera* (Hildesheim/New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1970), 2:494.

When in 1531 the Louvain theologians issued a formal condemnation of Agrippa's *De vanitate scientiarum,* the German humanist responded with two fiercely intonated polemical texts, the *Apologia adversus calumnias* [An apology against calumnies] and the *Quaerela super calumnia* [A complaint against calumnies].[29] Marc van der Poel adduces a number of Agrippa's statements from these two writings to demonstrate that he saw himself as a deeply devoted Catholic.[30] Among these statements one reads the following: "I shall show that I have never written as a doctrinal statement, nor believe or hold for true, anything that is the opposite of what the Catholic church affirms as doctrine, or believes, or feels, or holds for true."[31] And further: "Yet my mind is always sincere and I profess to be a Catholic, and I believe that I have not indulged in the liberty granted by the declamation to such an extent that I have become an apostate of the orthodox faith."[32]

To these declarations of orthodoxy one can add the entire Chapter 100 of the *De vanitate scientiarum,* titled *De Verbo Dei,* which conveys Agrippa's faith in the Holy Scriptures in the strongest possible terms, or the "apologetic" chapter nine of the third book of *De occulta philosophia,* which reads (perhaps with a little bit of humanist irony entwined) almost as the Apostles' Creed.[33]

Here, time and again, one is faced with Agrippa's multilayered approach aimed at different parts of his target audience. As evident from his correspondence and other biographical details, the two main groups in Agrippa's target audience were his fellow humanists and the category Richard Kieckhefer conveniently terms "the clerical underworld", encompassing clerics in the broadest sense of that word (monks, friars, active and failed university students, etc.).[34] It would make sense to claim that Agrippa's more "orthodox" statements were intended for the sensitive ears of humanists such as Erasmus, whereas those more "magical" were aimed at the occult theoreticians and practitioners of all sorts (a literary thread in Agrippa's opus that later led to the appearance of the spurious Fourth Book of the *De occulta philosophia*). However, such a simplified conclusion would fail to account for the pains the author took to delineate and discuss his theological and anthropological views and convictions over the course of several decades. In my view, the works of Cornelius Agrippa reveal an author who was in a dire need to define his own position – not only to his readers, but to himself – in the tense atmosphere of religious changes and controversies, and of conflicting modes of spirituality, which marked the late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century Western Europe.

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[29] Van der Poel, *Agrippa, The Humanist Theologian,* 120–21.

[30] Ibid., 133–40.

[31] Ibid., 134.

[32] Ibid., 135.

[33] Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy,* 465–66; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia,* 422–23.

[34] See Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 151–56. Erasmus is the most famous example of the first group, Trithemius of the second. On Agrippa's potential readership see Van der Poel, *Agrippa, The Humanist Theologian,* 30–1, 225–26; Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought,* 74–9, 89–92.

In Agrippa's time, as Charles Nauert points out, "the whole movement for church reform was amorphous and showed no clear distinction between fundamentally Catholic critics of church abuses and individuals who displayed significant deviations on matters of doctrine." According to him, this uncertainty rested "on inability to establish valid criteria for judging the position of individuals on the broad spectrum of early sixteenth-century religious belief."[35] However, there was at least one firm criterion for judging the position of the reform-minded individuals: that of their attitude towards the basic tenet of Christianity, the divine revelation of Jesus Christ. As already suggested, Agrippa and other Renaisance esotericists clearly differed from the more orthodox reformers by experiencing "the insufficiency" of the revelation. In stark contrast to the humanist *ad fontes* principle, they all found, in one way or another, that the *fontes* were not located only – or not even primarily – in Scripture, and that the wrongdoings of the schoolmen and clergy were not the cause but rather the consequence of the main problem. And the problem was, in their view, that the thread of "original" Christianity was almost lost and that, consequently, it had to be "reconstructed." This led Marsilio Ficino to postulate "a myth of a continuous esoteric tradition."[36] According to Ficino's macrohistorical narrative, "the revelation given to Moses supposedly included an esoteric interpretation which passed into cabala of the Jews and into the Hermetic literature of the Egyptians",[37] and from there into Christianity and the philosophical mysticism of the Pythagoreans and the Platonists, respectively. It is clear from Agrippa's works that he regarded the *Corpus Hermeticum* as no less sacred than the Bible in the sense that it also conveyed a divine revelation. Moreover, he accepted Ficino's notion of Hermes Trismegistus as a divine prophet and, even not too emphatically, Lodovico Lazzarelli's identification of Poemandres with Christ himself.[38]

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[35] See Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought,* 162–63.

[36] Charles G. Nauert, Jr., "Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18, no. 2 (1957): 167.

[37] Ibid., 167.

[38] See Wouter Hanegraaff, "Better than Magic: Cornelius Agrippa and Lazzarellian Hermetism," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, no. 1 (Summer, 2009): 1–25.

Agrippa's literary experience of the *prisca theologia,* acquired via Ficino and other authors, as well as his acceptance of this alternative, esoteric history of the revelation, formed the basis on which he interpreted his theological readings.[39] But why was the core doctrine of the New Testament – Christ's divine incarnation and resurrection – not enough for him in terms of theology? Consequently, what kind of a Christian and Catholic Agrippa believed himself to be and why did he feel the need to extend the scope of the revelation that lay in the very foundations of the Christian religion? It is indeed hard to imagine that a man of Agrippa's education and knowledge would not be the first to recognize himself as a plain heretic or apostate. However, nothing in his published writings (with the seeming exception of his famous retraction in the *De occulta philosophia*)[40] suggests that he saw himself as such.

I believe the answer to this puzzle lies in Agrippa's distinct understanding of Christianity. The only way for him to come to terms with his own heterodoxy and preserve the conviction of orthodoxy was to develop a polyvalent and nuanced view on Christianity, whereby he would embrace some of its aspects as genuine, and reject some others as corrupt, or at least bring them under suspicion as requiring to be reformed. With a necessary degree of simplification, I suggest a tripartite model that could account for Agrippa's paradoxical claims to orthodoxy.

My model is based on the hypothesis that Agrippa distinguished between three different levels, or aspects, of Christianity that might be provisionally termed *revelatory Christianity, doctrinal Christianity,* and *historical Christianity*. These are theoretical constructs that aim to offer an approximation of Agrippa's religious self-identification based on his publicly expressed attitudes. The advantage of this model is that it analytically fragments what is otherwise often taken as a self-explanatory term. These categories allow sorting out different aspects of Agrippa's religious reflection in his works, breaking away from the often evoked, unnuanced view of Christianity as a monolithic notion. Certainly, there are no sharp boundaries between the three categories as they overlap in many respects.

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[39] Agrippa's "horizon of expectation" was aptly formulated by Wayne Shumaker in the following way: "Like many other scholars of the period, he tends to accept everything ancient as true and right" (Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissances,* 155).

[40] For the feeble basis of this retraction see Dario Gurashi, *In deifico speculo: Agrippa's Humanism* (Paderborn: Brill / Wilhelm Fink, 2021), xxxviii–ix.

REVELATORY CHRISTIANITY

In the broadest sense, revelatory Christianity implied in Agrippa's works encompasses all instances of direct divine revelation to man which are, from his viewpiont, unquestionable and not subject to ratiocination. Among these, Christ's revelation in the New Testament is admittedly the highest and the most recent theophany, but not the only one. According to Ficino's concept of *prisca theologia,* the chain of divine revelations reaches back to pre-Christian sages and mythical figures such as Plato, Pythagoras, Hermes, Zoroaster, and Moses. As the incarnated Logos, Christ is the consummation of all the preceding revelations, but he does not rescind them. On the contrary, in Agrippa's syncretistic vision, Christ's divine revelation only confirms and reaffirms them. How else could one understand Agrippa's call for the rehabilitation of magic?[41] What could be the purpose of magic *after* Christ's revelatory and redemptory coming to this world? Thus, I suggest that, for Agrippa, revelatory Christianity is a meta-religious phenomenon whose various forms of manifestation emerge, develop, disappear, and then re-emerge over time. It can be compared to a number of doors left open for the mankind and leading to the divine, but not with each door open always and at the same time.

If we accept it as a peculiar mode of Agrippa's perception of Christianity, revelatory Christianity would amount to what is usually termed "Tradition" in the academic study of esotericism: it is "the idea that there exists an enduring tradition of superior wisdom, available to humanity since the earliest periods of history and kept alive through the ages, perhaps by a chain of divinely inspired sages or initiatory groups."[42] That Agrippa views "true" Christianity in these terms is evident from his explicit differentiation between the secret, "esoteric" Christianity and its "exoteric" counterpart:

> Christ also himself, while he lived on Earth, spoke after that manner and fashion that only the more intimate disciples should understand the mystery of the Word of God, but the other should perceive the parables only. [...] Therefore, it is not fit that those secrets which are amongst a few wise men, and communicated by mouth only, should

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[41] See, for instance, his letter to Trithemius dated April 8, 1510, in Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy,* liii; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia,* 68.

[42] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, ed., *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2006), 1125–35, s.v. "Tradition" (authored by Hanegraaff himself). He also points to the basic paradox underlying the notion of Tradition, which pertains to Agrippa's view on Christianity too: "If the fundamental verities of Christianity had already been known before the birth of Christ, did this not undermine the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and perhaps even make it superfluous?"

> be publicly written. Wherefore you will pardon me if I pass over in silence many and the chiefest secret mysteries of ceremonial magic.[43]

In this important passage several crucial points emerge: (i) the idea that "true" Christianity is reserved for a chosen minority bound by initiatic silence;[44] (ii) the crucial role of oral transmission *(solo ore),* which somewhat devalues the Christian literary production including Holy Scripture; 3) finally, an explicit admission that the mystery of the Logos embraces ritual magic too.[45]

Finally, revelatory Christianity is fundamentally based on the notion of direct personal revelation, or gnosis, as opposed to the rational knowledge of the divine.[46] This is also strongly implied in the Chapter 100 of the *De vanitate scientiarum,* which can be read as a sort of Agrippa's manifesto of his religious self-identification. Although it is commonly regarded as a token of his adherence to Biblical humanism guided by the principle of *sola scriptura,* this chapter contains a passage that can be interpreted in the light of the Hermetic and Lazzarellian notions of revelation: "Now the truth and understanding of the Canonical Scripture depends only upon the authority of God revealing the same and it cannot be comprehended by any judgment of the senses, by the over-reaching reason, by any syllogism of demonstration, by any science, by any speculation, by any contemplation, or by any human force, but only *by faith in Jesus Christ poured out into the soul from God the Father,* by the Holy Ghost."[47]

The *infusion* of faith into one's soul is an image that strongly corresponds to Agrippa's notion of a direct personal revelation and makes one of the main constituents of what I term revelatory Christianity. Since it is not subject to any other agent than God himself, it cannot be delusional, corrupted, or misinterpreted. It is beyond all questions and doubts; hence it is the genuine Christianity whose aspiring devotee Agrippa believes himself to be. Due to its nature, however, it is also the most evasive of the three aspects of Christianity since it is hardly possible to institutionalize an inner state of enlightenment and revelation. It lies entirely in the domain of *mens,* the highest part of the soul, which is directly linked to transcendence.[48]

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[43] Agrippa, *Occult philosophy,* 444; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia,* 405–6.

[44] As for initiatic silence, it is openly mentioned as a requirement in Agrippa's dedicatory letter to Trithemius, in which he speaks of a "secret key" to knowledge (*Epist.* III, 56, in Agrippa, *Opera,* 2:759–60) and in his master's response, in which he advices Agrippa to "communicate vulgar things to vulgar friends, but higher and more arcane matters to higher and secret friends only" (*Epist.* I, 24, in Agrippa, *Opera,* 2:623).

[45] Note, for instance, Agrippa's distinction between external and internal religion in *De occulta philosophia,* 409–12. He makes the same differentiation in the *De vanitate scientiarum,* chap. 60, where he extols "inwardness in religion" as opposed to "external ceremonies." See Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought,* 181–82.

[46] On Agrippa's notion of gnosis and spiritual rebirth, which he adopted mainly from the *Corpus Hermeticum,* but partly also through Lazzarelli's interpretation, see Hanegraaff, "Better than Magic," 9–14.

[47] Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences* (London: J. C. for Samuel Speed, 1676), 350, italics in the translation mine, accessed April 29, 2022, http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A26566.0001.001. The original passage: *De vanitate scientiarum,* Ch. 100, in Agrippa, *Opera,* 2:299.

DOCTRINAL AND HISTORICAL CHRISTIANITY

In this framework, doctrinal Christianity can be understood as a historical attempt to codify the direct experience and knowledge of the revelation. Taken in its broadest sense, this aspect encompasses the entirety of Christian literary production ranging from the Holy Scriptures to the theological writings of Agrippa's own time, including various non-literary forms of expressing dogmatic thought such as orations and university lectures that were usually preserved in a written form.

However, in the process of codifying gnosis, parts of it are inevitably changed, misinterpreted, or simply lost. Thus, doctrinal Christianity preserves only bits and pieces of revelatory Christianity and it is the duty of a divinely inspired exegete to retrieve the inner core of the revelation from distortion. It is evident from Agrippa's writings that, for him, parts of doctrinal Christianity are *not* Christianity at all. Some are even directly opposed to the spirit of revelatory Christianity and of diabolical origin. How else should one understand Agrippa's fierce, poisonous attacks on scholastic theologians, those hated *theologistae* and *sophistae* who had "hijacked" the true, sacred theology *(sanctum theologiae nomen furto et rapina sibi temere usurpant)?*[49] In his treatise *De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* Agrippa goes so far as to proclaim the Devil himself the father of scholastic theology.[50] Of course, it is his declamation *De vanitate scientiarum* that is the most well-known for its attacks on scholastic theology (particularly chapters 56–62). In chapter 97, Agrippa regards it as impious and in some of its aspects even heretical.[51] His critique of the erroneous nature of man extends even to the key figures of the Old and New Testaments. Moses, David, the apostles, the evangelists, and the prophets were all men and in certain respects lacked the knowledge of the truth; in some instances they have been found out to be mendacious.[52] Referring to Paul (Romans 3:4), Agrippa postulates a radically negative claim that "every human being is a liar" *(omnis homo mendax)*.[53] Once the revelation reaches the realm of words, it appears to lose its purity and direct impact.

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[48] On Agrippa's differentiation of the human soul, which is mostly based on Plotinus, see Putnik, "*Operari per fidem:* the Role of Faith in Agrippan Magic," 289–98.

[49] Agrippa, *De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum,* V, 18, in Vittoria Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo in Agrippa. Il "De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum"* (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa 2005), 154.

[50] Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo,* 160.

[51] This is an important point since the scholastic theology of Thomas Aquinas was the standard of orthodoxy in Agrippa's time; see Frank Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic. Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2013), 188: "Aquinas's corpus formed the core of moral theology in the sixteenth century and, even for humanists, was very much the standard by which orthodoxy was measured."

One could, thus, define doctrinal Christianity as a phenomenon based on human intellectual and literary production. As such, it is for Agrippa a legitimate field for debate and examination, a natural "playground" for the exercise of *ratio,* the middle part of the soul. Hence the importance of declamation, Agrippa's favourite literary genre, which treats various "uncertainties of the revelation" in the spirit of open dialogue.[54] Agrippa seems to regard doctrinal Christianity as the realm of Socratic maieutics, in which the bits and pieces of revelatory Christianity should be unearthed in a dialectical process of free discussion and critical thinking. Thus, in somewhat simplified terms, it could be stated that revelatory Christianity mostly engages Agrippa the theurgist, whereas doctrinal Christianity occupies Agrippa the humanist.

Evidently, these nuances in Agrippa's suggested view of Christianity raise the question of the relation between the two discussed modes. In other words, in which of the Christian literary works – and to what extent – Agrippa acknowledges the presence of gnosis? It is a complex question that requires a thorough analysis of Agrippa's attitude towards each of the authors he refers to, and as such it surpasses the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: as noted by Charles Nauert and Marc van der Poel, Agrippa's treatment of his Christian sources is governed by the principle of *the temporal closeness* to the revelation for assessing the credibility of a given source.[55] In this sense, it is probably one of his main criteria for assessing the degree of gnosis present in a particular writing. However, regardless of this question, it is safe to conclude that, for Agrippa, doctrinal Christianity is *not* the proper subject of faith and cannot be unequivocally regarded as part of the eternal, genuine tradition of spiritual revelations.

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[52] Agrippa, "De vanitate scientiarum," chap. 90, in Agrippa, *Opera,* 2:294.

[53] Agrippa, "De vanitate scientiarum," chap. 59, in Agrippa, *Opera,* 2:109–10.

[54] Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian,* 264. Van der Poel's masterful analysis of Agrippa's complex position within the contested fields of scholasticism, Biblical and humanist theology, and Renaissance syncretism mostly pertains to what I term doctrinal Christianity.

[55] Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought,* 128; Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian,* 85.

Of the three proposed modes, historical Christianity is admittedly the hardest to pinpoint as it evidently embraces the other two: both personal revelation and the codification of gnosis take place in certain points of time and are thus inevitably marked by historicity. However, what I have in mind is a plethora of historical phenomena and practices commonly labeled as Christian that Agrippa strongly disregarded, if not even openly abhorred, from the widespread practice of witch-hunt to various wrongdoings of the clergy. In a humanist vein, Agrippa attacks monks for hypocrisy, lack of morality, arrogance, and even the types of their robes. He attacks popes for their excessive political power and self-proclaimed ability to release souls from purgatory. He criticizes excessive devotion to images and relics (although he admits that Christ has performed many miracles through saints).[56] His biography is replete with instances of fierce fights with high-ranking clerics such as Claudius Salini and Nicolaus Savini.[57]

To a large extent, Agrippa's violent anticlericalism is the result of historical circumstances, with the blossoming of humanist theology on the one side and the emergence of the Lutheran movement on the other. However, there seems to be another dimension of it: Agrippa's deep conviction that "true" Christianity is an inner, revelatory tradition not accessible to many. This is clearly reflected in his disregard for the external acts of worship: "Those carnal and external ceremonies are unable to bring men close to God, to whom nothing is acceptable except faith in Jesus Christ, with ardent imitation of Him in love, and firm hope of salvation and reward."[58] As Nauert points out, "[t]his doctrine, despite a superficial similarity, is not Lutheran justification by faith alone, but rather the stress on inwardness in religion. [...] As Agrippa sees it, perfect Christians require little or no externality in religion."[59] Again, what emerges here is the crucial opposition between "internal" and "external" Christianity, with the former being regarded as genuine, intrinsic, original, and the latter being termed "carnal", with all the implications this term carries in Agrippa's thought. One of the most important implications is Agrippa's dualistic anthropology of Neoplatonic and Hermetic provenance, his differentiation between internal and external man.[60] Each ontological level of human existence merits its own religion.

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[56] For a detailed discussion on Agrippa's criticism of contemporary Christian institutions, customs, and practices see Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought,* 174–82.

[57] Ibid., 59–61.

[58] Agrippa, "De vanitate scientiarum," chap. 60, quoted by Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought,* 181.

[59] Ibid., 181.

[60] See, for instance, Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy,* 579, 585; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia,* 508, 514. On Agrippa's dualist anthropology see my work "Undressing the 'True Man': A Philological Look at Cornelius Agrippa's Anthropology," *Literary History – Journal of Literary Studies* 52, no. 172 (2020): 69–86.

To sum up, I suggest that much of what went under the label of Christianity in Agrippa's time fell far below the expectations he had for the pure revelatory tradition he thought he discovered. In other words, the kernel of gnosis he believed had been sparsely preserved in doctrinal Christianity was even more at risk in the social and institutional manifestations of the Christian religion. With this I arrive at the main conclusion suggested by my analysis of Agrippa's complex understanding of Christianity: he could regard himself as faithful, devout Christian insofar as he construed Christianity in a manner that more or less corresponded to the above-delineated model. If so, Cornelius Agrippa did not consider doctrinal and historical Christianity to be binding in any intrinsic way, in contrast to revelatory Christianity, which carried the living tradition of gnosis and was thus the one and only *fides Christiana*.