

***Refiner's Fire and the Yates Thesis: Hermeticism, Esotericism, and the History of Christianity***

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In his award winning book, *Refiner's Fire*, John Brooke identified “striking parallels between the Mormon concepts of the coequality of matter and spirit, of the covenant of celestial marriage, and of an ultimate goal of human godhood and the philosophical traditions of alchemy and hermeticism, drawn from the ancient world and fused with Christianity in the Italian Renaissance.”<sup>1</sup> Building on Frances Yates’s highly influential *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) and her follow up *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979), Brooke traced the spread of these ideas from the radical sectarians of the English Civil War to the American colonies to Joseph Smith. In doing so, Brooke defined “hermeticism”<sup>2</sup> the way other scholars had — as a fusion of “Platonism, Gnosticism, and Egyptian theology” — and located its full flowering, following Yates’s lead, in the Renaissance with Marsilio Ficino’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>3</sup>

Linking Mormonism to Yates’s thesis was a great advance in contextualizing Smith’s radical ideas, but it also introduced problems. Yates’ work was already controversial when *The Refiner's Fire* came out, and her view of a “Hermetic Tradition” has by now been completely

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<sup>1</sup> Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, xiii-xvi.

<sup>2</sup> While Frances Yates used the terms “hermetism” and “Hermetic Tradition”, it has since become conventional to use “hermeticism” to refer to Renaissance interest in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Hermes Trismegistus, reserving “hermetism” for the original Alexandrian context which gave rise to these texts in late antiquity. This article follows current conventions.

<sup>3</sup> Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, xvi, 8-11. The major tenets of hermetism, Brooke argues, were human divine potential and the rejection of creation ex nihilo.

discarded by intellectual historians. Critiques of Yates's understanding of "hermeticism" and "magic" are particularly relevant to Brooke's thesis. Situating both concepts within the history of Christian polemics undercuts the dichotomization of Christianity, on the one hand, and hermeticism and magic, on the other, and allows us to situate Mormonism and Smith's sources within a richer understanding of the history of Christianity.

### The Critique of Yates

The overarching problem with the Yates thesis is that the traits that she (and Brooke, following her lead) characterized as "hermetic" did not suddenly emerge in the Renaissance as a response to the discovery and translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*; many of these ideas had already been integrated in Christianity by church fathers influenced by Neoplatonism. Origen, for example, was central to the early modern developments that Brook sought to trace. Moreover, what Renaissance thinkers borrowed from the Church fathers and other Neoplatonic theologians (such as Iamblichus and Proclus) was not so much a "Hermetic" position, as a broader Platonic Orientalism that traced the origin of pagan philosophy in a distant and universal ancient wisdom of the Orient, a *prisca theologia*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Neoplatonism, Christian Platonism, and even "Platonic Orientalism" are better terms for the movement that Yates described than hermeticism.

D. P. Walker recognized this, as did other, before Yates's work appeared.<sup>5</sup> Walker's *Spiritual and Demonic Magic* (1958) preceded Yates's *Giordano Bruno* and his *The Decline of*

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*; cf. Dylan Burns, "The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster, Hekate's Couch, and Platonic Orientalism in Psellos and Plethon," *Aries* 6.2 (2006): 158-179.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Walker, the meticulously researched works of Lynn Thorndike, Will-Erich Peuckert, Paul Oskar Kristeller and others, published in the first half of the twentieth century, mean that what Yates called the "hermetic tradition" (adopting, in fact, the category from Kristeller, who first invented it in 1938) was far better known by existing scholarship than her readers were led to believe. On this, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism in the Academy*, 322-334.

*Hell* (1964) came out in the same year. *The Decline of Hell* focused on a particular aspect of Christian Platonism, namely the early modern revival of interest in the early Christian fathers, Origen in particular. In a later work, Walker went on to explain the crucial notion of *prisca theologia*, or the belief in a primal ancient wisdom that was so important to Christian Platonists of the era.<sup>6</sup> Brooke cited *Spiritual and Demonic Magic* and *The Ancient Theology*, but following Yates (who was also indebted to her close friend Walker) he preferred “hermetic” to “Christian Platonic” and made no mention of the early fathers.

Brian Copenhaver initiated the systematic critique of Yates’s use of “hermeticism” in 1988.<sup>7</sup> He noted that the practices of Ficino and Agrippa – two of Yates’ prototype “hermetic magi” – did not in fact derive from *the Hermetica* at all, but rather from the theurgy of the Neoplatonist Proclus.<sup>8</sup> Ficino was interested in what he called “natural magic,” but he drew upon Neoplatonism rather than the hermetic corpus, for the simple reason that “the Hermetica say rather little about magic.” As Copenhaver concluded, “[t]he works of [Neoplatonists] Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Synesius, and Proclus are the most important ancient philosophical sources for the theory of magic in the Renaissance. Research on magic in the Renaissance should shift its attention to these text and to their interpretation in the early modern period.”<sup>9</sup>

Copenhaver followed up these critiques two years later with his article, “Natural Magic, Hermeticism, and Occultism in Early Modern Science” (1990). Copenhaver again asserted the importance of Proclus and critiqued Yates’s used of the term “hermetic.” Copenhaver noted that early modern people did use the term “hermetic” to describe a particular attitude toward nature

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<sup>6</sup> Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (1972)

<sup>7</sup> The earliest critique was in Allen G. Debus’ review of *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* in *Isis* 55, no.3 (1964): 389-91.

<sup>8</sup> The *Hermetica* are the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the hermetic text called the *Asclepius*, which had been translated earlier.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Copenhaver, “Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus, and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance,” in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), 79-110.

but argued that Yates “sometimes used this term as if it meant the same thing a ‘magical’ or ‘occultist’ broadly understood.” Copenhaver argued that “the term ‘hermetic’ should be used primarily to name a [specific] set of texts,” i.e., the *Corpus Hermeticum*. A more general understanding of the term, he argued, “can lead only to more confusion.” Finally, Copenhaver noted, “In ordinary modern English, ‘magic’ is a vague term,” which can mean practices that “from the point of view of orthodox religion or philosophy or, more recently, science ... seemed illegitimate, erroneous, somehow marginal.” This lack of clarity made “magic” a problematic term.<sup>10</sup> Four years later Brooke, following Yates, lumped a number of practices and ideas including astrology, alchemy, and Kabbalah under the hermetic umbrella; made almost no mention of Plato and Neoplatonism; and associated a vaguely defined “magic” with “hermeticism.”<sup>11</sup> Over reliance on Yates, thus, obscured the Neoplatonic origins of many of these ideas, as well as their appropriation by the early church fathers.

### **Esotericism and Anti-Platonic Polemics**

Since *Refiner's Fire*, scholars have extended Copenhaver's critiques and embraced Walker's arguments. A paradigmatic example of this line of scholarship is Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012),<sup>12</sup> which

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<sup>10</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, “Natural Magic, Hermeticism, and Occultism in Early Modern Science,” in *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution* (1990): 261-302. Despite these critiques, Copenhaver concluded by praising Yates for “her catholic and imaginative desire to explore areas of thought and culture hitherto considered insignificant or inappropriate to serious historical discourse” (289).

<sup>11</sup> Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 10-12.

<sup>12</sup> Other significant contributions to the reevaluation of Yates prior to Hanegraaff's book include contributions to Robert S. Westman, and J. E. McGuire (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Scientific Revolution: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar, March 9, 1974* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 1977); Merkel and Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance* (1988); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity,” *Aries* 1.1 (2001): 5-37; contributions to Martin Muslow (ed.), *Das Ende des Hermetismus: Historische Kritik und neue Naturphilosophie in der Spätrenaissance: Dokumentation und Analyse der Debatte um die Datierung der hermetischen Schriften von Genebrard bis Casaubon (1567-1614)* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002); Gyorgy E. Szonyi, *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004);

incorporated the previous critiques of Yates's paradigm and set out to replace it. Hanegraaff's project is intimately tied to the emergence of an entire field of research in the past two decades, under the umbrella of "Western esotericism"<sup>13</sup>: according to Hanegraaff, the *perceived unity* of currents typically labeled "esoteric", "hermetic", "occult", and "magical" in western intellectual history is a product of consecutive processes of exclusion that have sought to define what counts as "proper" religion, "proper" philosophy and "proper" science. Importantly, Hanegraaff demonstrates that this polemic was also directed against the *church fathers*: Protestant reformers and scholars of the Counter-Reformation developed an entire discourse *against* the ancient apologists, whose appetite for Greek and "Oriental" (that is, Egyptian and Chaldean) philosophy was now deemed a horrible mistake. The moment the fathers embraced Plato, argued the scholar Giovanni Battista Crispo, was the moment that the devil was allowed to infiltrate the ranks of the Church. In the eyes of Christian anti-Platonists, Plato's silver tongue had corrupted key theologians, such as Clement, Origen, Justin Martyr, and Augustine. Enlightenment philosophers and historians continued the polemical discourse sparked by the Reformation. The targets of these polemical encounters, argues Hanegraaff, are what scholars now term "esotericism". To study it is to uncover an entire continent of Western cultural history that has been extremely influential, yet few were aware even existed.

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Richard Kieckhefer, "Did Magic Have a Renaissance? An Historiographical Question Revisited," in *Magic and the Classical Tradition* (London: Warburg Institute, 2006), 199-213; Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, foreword by Jan Assmann, trans by David Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007); Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Stephen Clucas, "John Dee's Angelic Conversations and the *Ars Notoria*: Renaissance Magic and Medieval Theurgy," in *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought*, ed. Stephen Clucas, (Springer Dordrecht, The Netherlands: 2010), 231-74; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> For a standard overview of this field, see the massive two-volume *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Hanegraaff ed., in collaboration with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach; Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2004).

Just as Walker had done fifty years earlier, Hanegraaff reasserted the importance of the early fathers in early modern debates about “ancient wisdom” revealed to the pagans. Realizing that the fathers were of no help for early modern reformers wishing to cleanse Christianity of all pagan influence, Protestant scholars responded that the fathers had themselves been corrupted by paganism. As Hanegraaff notes, Protestant heresiologists even developed a hermeneutic for identifying covert paganism among contemporaries, singling out the belief that the soul was uncreated and the denial of creation *ex nihilo* as the chief signs of pagan influence.<sup>14</sup>

Hanegraaff describes how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestant scholars who worked to develop the modern discipline of philosophy sought to separate Christianity from Platonism by arguing for a firm demarcation between revelation (the scriptures) and reason (Greek thought). For this project, any current of thought that mixed the two was problematic, and Hanegraaff argues that in the Enlightenment the terms “superstition,” “magic,” and “occult” emerged as the favored terms of derision for scholars who mixed them. “Although the terms ‘superstition,’ ‘magic,’ and ‘occult’ have long histories, they were essentially reinvented during the period of the Enlightenment, in such a manner that they could serve to demarcate ‘the Other of science and rationality.’” Hanegraaff argues that this tainted history carries normative implications for scholars’ practice today: Because of the ideological slant of these terms, scholars need to find more neutral terminology. This does not make “magic” entirely unsuited for research, however, but rather switches the angle of analysis: “[t]he term ‘magic’ is an important object of historical research, but definitely unsuitable as an etic instrument for doing research.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 94-95, 105-7.

<sup>15</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 157, 168. “The basic error Enlightenment ideologues tried to remove from Christian culture was paganism, but redefined as its long-standing weakness for imagining the presence of spiritual realities in nature” (163). Many balked at this agenda “as driving God himself out of his own world, making him an irrelevancy while emptying his creation of any mystery” (156).

### Smith's Appropriation of Rejected Knowledge

The dynamic of rejected knowledge that Hanegraaff describes also provides some clues for contextualizing the esoteric dimension of Mormonism's historical roots. For example, knowledge of Platonic Christianity and early Christian sects was available to Joseph Smith *precisely* through the encyclopedic literature coming out of the critical project of the Enlightenment – that is, in literature aimed at *debunking* the *Urdummheit* of the ancients.<sup>16</sup> To illustrate with another specific example: knowledge of John Dee's communications with angels through the crystal was disseminated primarily through work aimed at debunking the conversations as demonically inspired, fraudulent, or a combination of both.<sup>17</sup> Meric Casaubon's *A True & Faithful Relation* (1659), which presented Dee as duped by a no-good necromancer, is demonstrated to have caused a revival of magical practice in the late seventeenth century,<sup>18</sup> and may even have exercised an influence on Joseph Smith's own practices, as Fleming's work now suggests.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than interpreting these as part of a line of transmission from the *Hermetica* of the first centuries CE through Renaissance Neoplatonism to Joseph Smith, we can take our cue from Hanegraaff's identification of a process of exclusion in Western intellectual history that has essentially worked to exorcise some specific clusters of theological thought. The theology of the Neoplatonists, like that of the *Hermetica*, can be characterized, in Jan Assmann's apt term, as forms of "cosmotheism": theological systems that do not clearly distinguish creator from

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<sup>16</sup> As one of the present authors (Fleming) shows in his recent PhD dissertation.

<sup>17</sup> On which see Deborah Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Aspren, *Arguing with Angels*, 29-42.

<sup>19</sup> Fleming, "The Fulness of the Gospel," chaps. 2 and 3.

creation, matter from spirit, god from world.<sup>20</sup> This position has been theologically difficult for Christianity, which has adopted a range of positions on the matter of theosis (or divination) from the nuanced Christian Platonism of the Greek-speaking Eastern Orthodox to the anti-Platonism of the Reformation-era Calvinists. Thus, shifting our frame of reference from “hermeticism” to Christianity’s complicated relationship with Neoplatonism provides a framework within which we can reconsider Brooke’s observation that Smith found solutions to theological problems that resembled those of the early-modern Neoplatonists. Viewed in light of this complex interaction, we can find any number of similar responses in the intervening centuries. Thus, for example, we find radical pietists who took inspiration from Jakob Böhme, John Wesley who took inspiration from the pietists and the early church fathers, and Christian theosophists who borrowed alchemical metaphors and understandings of nature from Paracelsus and the Rosicrucian literature.<sup>21</sup> These influences on pietists, Wesleyans, and Christian theosophists, with their underlying Neoplatonism, led to a heightened emphasis on inward devotion, mystical apprehension and radical experiential communion with the divine – sometimes couched in sexual terms<sup>22</sup> – among the religious dissenters who migrated to the North American colonies and later the United States. A greater awareness of the ways in which this experiential emphasis, with roots in the Christian-Neoplatonic synthesis of the early church, was reclaimed and repackaged through many routes can help us to better understand the enormous religious creativity of the so-

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<sup>20</sup> Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 370-373; Asprey, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 279-282, 423-425.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom’s Children*.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. contributions to Wouter Hanegraaff and Jeffrey Kripal (eds.), *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2008).

called “burned over district.”<sup>23</sup> These are all themes that Brooke brought to the attention of Mormon scholars as part of a “Hermetic Tradition.”

There is still much important work left to be done in connecting the studies of somewhat Eurocentric research on esotericism with the work of Americanists studying what is known on the North-American continent as “metaphysical religion.” As Catherine Albanese noted in her groundbreaking historical study of some of these currents, American Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, New Thought and related currents cannot be properly understood apart from a broader transatlantic intellectual history that includes Mesmerism, *Naturphilosophie*, Paracelsism, Rosicrucianism, and other currents connected with esotericism. However, Albanese, too, leaning in part on Brooke’s *Refiner’s Fire*, relied too much on a Yatesian view of a broad early modern underground current of “hermeticism,” stretching its nebulous tentacles across the Atlantic. Instead we should resituate the early history of Mormonism *not* in terms of “hermeticism,” but rather as one of the many movements that recovered something of the Neoplatonism of the early church, sometimes directly and sometimes through an appropriation of ostensibly “pagan” theologies culled from esoteric “rejected knowledge.” In our view, updating the foundations of Brooke’s research program and pushing it forward along these lines carries the potential not only of increasing our understanding of Mormon roots, but of extending the relevance of the history of Mormonism to other disciplines in the humanities as well.

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<sup>23</sup> On the spread of Pietism and Christian Theosophy to the Americas in the seventeenth century onwards, see Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism*, 127-130. On Wesley, see Ted Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville, Kingswood Books, 1991) and Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999).