

Melanie J. van Oort – Hall, *The Gods of Destruction and the Creation of the New Age: Self-Sacrifice and Self-Divinization in Holistic Esotericism from Antiquity to Modernity*, lxxiii + 390 with appendices. A dissertation presented in fulfillment of the requirements of the Doctor's Degree (Ph.D.) in Theology (S.T.D.).

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Summary:

In contemporary western spirituality, there is often an assumption that by changing the main paradigm or understanding of reality from traditional Christian theism to holistic monism, the world will become a "better place." The idea behind this thinking is that Christian theism, understood as "dualism" and "ignorance of the holistic nature of Reality as such," rather than "original sin," is the root or source of human violence against other humans, animals and even the planet. Intrinsically coupled with the belief in the holistic paradigm of reality, where All is One (*hen to pan*), is the belief that the All and everything in "It" is divine, including the human person. The totality of Reality as such is understood as a divine impersonal Totality of "Mind," "Consciousness," "Self," or "Higher Self," which comprises within Itself all dualities, e.g. good and evil, light and dark, male and female, high and low, etc. Contact with the "Higher Self" is understood as contact with "God" and is believed to be the primordial or perennial human religious experience and perhaps even the origin of religion itself. Self-divinization through self-realization into the "Higher Self" (i.e. knowledge of one's inherent divinity) with its concomitant belief in an infinite "progressive spiritual evolution" can be seen as a contemporary and popular understanding of salvation.

The belief in the almost salvific function of "paradigm change" is rooted in a certain type of Romantic and esoteric idealism, which itself reaches back to ancient Hermetic *gnosis* (Hermetism) and perhaps even further, to Presocratic forms of religious ecstasy and understanding of reality, anachronistically understood as "shamanism" and "animism" respectively. The fact that Hermetism is connected to shamanism and animism is significant for Christian dialogue with contemporary esoteric forms of religiosity in the West and to some extent explains the increasing popularity of Presocratic philosophers and neo-shamanic spirituality.

Central to our evaluation of contemporary esotericism and argument is our agreement with many experts that shamanic ecstasy represents the origin of primitive religious experience or indeed something like shamanism was the soil out of which primitive religion, namely, the Mystery religions, grew. However, evidence shows that this "experience" was not as peaceful and harmonious as some contemporary esotericists contend. It probably grew out of some societal crisis that was resolved through an extreme act of violence, either the killing of animals for food (Burkert: *Homo Necans*, 1972; *Greek Religion*, 1977) or the revenge murder of humans (Girard: *Violence and the Sacred*, 1972; *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 1978). The role of the primitive "shaman" or *iatromantis* as priest, healer and sorcerer (*pharmakeus*) was in fact bound with violence towards both animals and other human beings who had become its victims or scapegoats (*pharmakos*). Sacrificial victims, who represented the deified original victim, were used to repeat the "harmonizing" violence that brought an end to the crisis and to appease the gods as a remedy (*pharmakon*). After the founding violence, which established the parameters of a religious community, it was the role of the "shaman" as a priest (or mediator between the community and the gods) and sorcerer to mediate the ritualised killing processes or the pharmeketic mechanism. Girard sees the Judeo-Christian tradition as developing within a similar milieu but as both a response and critique to this animistic understanding of reality and divinity.

In the contemporary esoteric holistic perspective, since all is considered to be a divine "sameness," the respect of "otherness" is not a solution to violence, but perceived as its cause. The assumption is that if all conscious humans would become aware that by hurting others one is actually hurting oneself, then, violence would end. This is the basis of contemporary holistic ethics and the esoteric equivalent of the Christian "golden rule."

Based on the holistic and idealistic understanding of reality and divinity, the assumption is then made that if a "critical mass" of humans would become conscious of their inherent divinity and "think holism," then a new age of peace and harmony could be catalyzed. Believing individual

consciousnesses to be fragments of the Total Consciousness, concentrating and projecting thoughts would somehow spark a greater level of consciousness within the divine Mind Itself, raising the level of the totality of Reality and, hence, humanity to ever higher levels of divinity or consciousness.

Nevertheless, what is often covertly left unsaid or presented in coded terms by many esoteric theorists is that the catalyst to “start the salvific thinking” and achieve peace and harmony and full awareness of one’s divinity is some level (or type) of dialectical violence or destruction, which is understood as a “sacrifice.” Since “divinity” is understood as a Totality of all binary opposites (good and evil, light and dark, creation and destruction, male and female, etc.), then, a conjunction of these opposites (*coniunctio oppositorum*) or a “chemical wedding” of opposites (sacred union or *hieros gamos*) is supposed to result in a higher level of the same. Again, the *coniunctio* is understood within the greater alchemical tradition to be a sacrifice that necessarily entailed some sort of violence, although this was originally understood as perpetrated against inanimate materials. Later, the sacrifice of one’s “self” (understood as limited ego-consciousness) and even of the other -- who is in fact within the monistic paradigm not recognized as a “real other” but as an illusion of one’s higher consciousness -- is often placed within the framework of spiritual or psychological alchemy as the preferential occult technique used to “spark” higher consciousness and capture the “philosopher’s stone,” another term for divinity.

In Antiquity, pagan Hermetic (self)-divinization was interpreted through a Neoplatonic, yet Gnostic metaphysical framework and implied some type of participation *in* the notion of a Primal Man or *Anthropos* (Aion) as an ideal form of humanity. In the Hermetic Gnostic Myth of the Fall, the image of the Primal Man had been tainted by having sexual intercourse with matter or nature (*Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 16). Since matter was considered to be degenerate, contact with it brought about the *Anthropos*’ necessary suffering. Human beings were in some sense the progeny of this ill-fated union. Nevertheless, the individual man could reverse the course of the Man’s Fall by recognizing his heavenly origin *in* the Primal Man and ascending through the spheres in ecstatic contemplation. A sign that one had been divinized within the Hermetic system was to have a vision of oneself in the Mind of God. Although sacrifice and suffering were implied, it was mitigated by the Neoplatonic interpretation.

The focus of our research is to help the reader understand how, on the one hand, contemporary esoteric self-divinization is both sacrificial and dependent upon ancient Hermetism with antecedents in the Mysteries and Greek iatromantism, but on the other hand, deviates from it. To do this, we have had to “uncover” the sacrificial aspect of Hermetic self-divinization over a large span of time, which is seldom a topic of contemporary research. We propose that the re-interpretation became possible through the philosophy, and possible sacrificial suicide of Giordano Bruno, a thinker who is rarely discussed today. Bruno most probably reinterpreted Hermetic self-divinization, not as collective participation *in* the primal *Anthropos* (also known as Aion or in the Kabbalistic tradition as Adam Kadmon) where one saw oneself *in* the Mind of God, but as a solipsistically seeing oneself *as* the Mind of God, leading to pananthropism or the intellectual collapsing of the cosmos into the individual ego. Since Bruno no longer had recourse to the Neoplatonic scheme, he used a psychologized version of spiritual alchemy, which he later interpreted temporally due to his pananthropic disposition.

In Modernity, the continued danger of this possibility becomes evident in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) and the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung, who simultaneously attempted to reinterpret Hermetic divinization as the process of Individuation, a process where one attempts through psychological “conjunctions” to descend into the collective unconscious (Jung’s version of the Primal Man) and balance the opposites within oneself, but also to mitigate or “break” the pananthropic tendency, which became full-blown in Nietzsche (cf. Jung, *Seminar on Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 1934-1939). This more potentially temporally destructive tendency continued in the writings of the New Age mothers Alice Bailey and Annie Besant, whose writings display an intimate knowledge of the ideas of Bruno.

Conclusion:

Our research has shown that due to its dependence on ancient shamanism and Mystery Religions, Hermetic self-divinization whether ancient or contemporary is sacrificial, although this varies in types and degrees. Given the nature of Hermetism in Antiquity and its strong connections to both the Mysteries and the Presocratics, we might see Hermetism as a later more privatized development of

shamanic/occult techniques of ecstasy that had become institutionalized in the Mysteries. Because Hermetism grew out of the same intellectual milieu as early Christianity, its spirituality could easily be mistaken for it (Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 1960). Furthermore, it offered a recognized philosophical framework and structure of initiation into intellectual Mysteries (i.e. seeing oneself *in* the Mind of God and becoming Aion), which could procure impressive mystical and ecstatic experiences for the practitioner and seeming assurance of his or her immortality. The fact that its mystical exercises could be practiced solipsistically, without the control or oversight of religious authorities, institutions or communities, made Hermetic spirituality popular in times of societal and communal disintegration, such as late Antiquity, the late Renaissance and Reformation as well as in Modernity. This explains to a large degree why contemporary esoteric spirituality or contemporary holistic esotericism (my coinage), which is sometimes codified as “New Age,” remains popular today.

Although the promotion of the holistic paradigm change is a cause for concern, it is perhaps also a cause for hope. In some ways, the acceptance of contemporary esoteric holism is a re-acceptance of something similar to the ancient animistic worldview in which Early Christianity first developed. Perhaps the “paradigm change” presents traditional Christianity and Catholic theology with a possibility to rediscover the power of its traditional language about the nature of Christian salvation and redemption, which includes *theosis* or deification by grace (Cf. Ps 82:6; Jn 10:34; 2 Pet 1:3-4; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3, 19, 1; Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54.) that has been successively obscured and perhaps even distorted by the Renaissance confusion of Hermetic with Christian divinity, Reformation debates and polemics, Enlightenment ideals and Romantic theories.

In this dissertation, we have brought together various texts and personages from Antiquity to Modernity, which are influential in contemporary esoteric circles, yet, are seldom discussed in contemporary theology, thus bridging a gap in recent scholarship. As shown, these personages all have been in one form or another associated with the greater Hermetic Tradition, and their writings and lives show how the idea of esoteric self-divinization is inherently connected to the idea of violence and destruction, euphemistically termed as “sacrifice” or “self-sacrifice.” Each chapter of this dissertation is constructed to show and describe how this self-sacrificial and sometimes even suicidal idea was connected to esoteric forms of thinking about divinity and self-divinization from Presocratic Antiquity to Modernity. By presenting a broad spectrum of influential esoteric personage and texts, we hope to show that “paradigm change” from so-called Christian “dualism,” i.e. Judeo-Christian theism, to esoteric “holism” does not offer a solution to world peace and the spiritual crisis of the West, but might in fact exacerbate it. Due to its sacrificial structure, perhaps greater sacrifices will be demanded in order to resolve the deepening crisis.

Annexed Theses:

1. Contemporary Holistic Esotericism or “New Age” is a moment within the larger western esoteric tradition and can be understood as “Hermetic.” In so far as contemporary esotericism participates in the Hermetic Tradition, the holistic worldview or paradigm is a contemporary expression of ancient “animism.” As a Hermetic spirituality, to some degree, this explains the eclectic nature of contemporary esotericism and its pre-occupation with “neo-shamanism.”
2. Ancient Hermetic and early Renaissance self-divinization entailed a process of intellectual ascension through Neoplatonic spheres, preparatory “madness” or mental instability, entrance into the “ogdoad” leading to the contemplation of oneself in the Mind of God, where one was absorbed or participated in the Primal Man, *Anthropos* or Aion (Cf. Dodd, 1960; Mahé, 2003; Kingsley, 2003). A confluence of events and ideas came together to change the understanding of Hermetic self-divinization in Modernity, being first clearly expressed in the Hermetic philosophy of Giordano Bruno.
3. Dependent upon Presocratic subterranean emanation and having no recourse to a Neoplatonic interpretation of Hermetic self-divinization (having reversed it), Bruno used a psychologized version of spiritual alchemy as his method of Hermetic self-divinization, which within the holistic (monistic) framework can become “temporalized” or “biologized” (Cf. *Gli Eroici Furori*). Furthermore, Bruno no longer saw himself *in* the Mind of God, as a sign of divinization, but *as* the Mind of God or *as* Aion, containing all of the powers of the universe within himself. This will have consequences for the Modern interpretation of Hermetic self-

divinization, leading to the possibility of full-blown panentheism and a temporalized understanding of divinatory self-destruction.

4. Carl Gustav Jung was a modern interpreter of the western esoteric or Hermetic Tradition and the psychologization of spiritual alchemy as it had developed after Bruno's re-interpretation. Jung's system of Hermetic self-divinization is called "Individuation" and entails a process of psychological alchemy, which is probably patterned on Friedrich Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Jung's original understanding of Individuation demanded a period of psychic instability or "madness," which was interpreted as a sign of "genius." Although Jung never rejected the basic premises of psychological alchemy and the scheme of Hermetic self-divinization as "becoming Aion," after witnessing its effects on the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (cf. Nietzsche Seminar, 1934-1939), he attempted to mitigate the sacrificial panentheistic interpretation of Hermetic divinity by rendering it "symbolic."
5. The recognized New Age Mothers, Alice Bailey and Annie Besant continue the sacrificial panentheistic interpretation of modern Hermetic divinity and, unlike Jung, do not attempt to mitigate it. The understanding of divinity in Annie Besant is clearly dependent on Giordano Bruno as she recognizes him as the martyr and apostle of the Theosophical Society.
6. As a thought system that is dependent on Hermetic animism, the process of self-divinization in contemporary esotericism and New Age holism adheres to the magical and ecstatic structure of early shamans and sorcerers (i.e. *pharmakeus*), and is sacrificial and potentially, (self)-destructive.
7. As a response to Gnostic and magical conceptions of divinization, the Early Church seemed to accept that in Jesus Christ, God became man, so that man might participate in God's divinity (*De Incarnatione*, 54). However, in the Renaissance, with the tacit acceptance of Hermetic self-divinization by influential Christian intellectuals, confusion arose as to the nature of Christian deification or transfiguration by grace. Due to the ferocity of the Reformation debates, Christians in the West took either a Hermetic position (e.g. esoteric Christianity), or denied its possibility (e.g. orthodox Protestantism) or sought to avoid the topic in theological discourse (e.g. Roman Catholicism). With sufficient historical distance from the Reformation, the popularity of the notion of contemporary esoteric self-divinization will force traditional Christian theology in the West to re-understand salvation as connected to *theosis*, or transfiguration by grace as well as an inherent aspect of Christian Theodicy.
8. Contemporary spirituality's return to pre-Christian animism shows the continuity between ancient and contemporary forms of spirituality. Because contemporary esoteric "holism" or New Age is now possibly the dominant western paradigm of reality (Hanegraaff, 2002), this more magical model of reality consciously challenges traditional Christian theism; nevertheless, its growth also opens a door of opportunity. Given the fact that this was the model of reality in which traditional Christianity first rose to dominance, the "return" offers traditional Christian theology a possibility to re-express its traditional language about creation, the necessary uniqueness of the human person, the nature of evil, the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross, salvation, redemption, original sin, etc. in a fresh and convincing way.

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