

To Be Born (Again) from God: Scriptural Obscurity as a Theological Way Out for Cornelius Agrippa

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In some of the works of Agrippa von Nettesheim, a Renaissance thinker who was as unorthodox as he was controversial in his blending of various Christian and non-Christian doctrines, one finds a curious phenomenon which might be termed "orthodoxy building." In this paper I examine the phenomenon in the context of Agrippa's rhetorical strategies as well as his theological preferences and interpretations. The main argument is that Agrippa's construction of "orthodoxy" was necessary for his attempted theological synthesis and that, among other means, his interpretation of scriptural obscurities played a significant role in that process.

A well-known humanist, occultist, and theologian of his time, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535) was one of the most important German representatives of a broad philosophical current often labeled Renaissance Neoplatonism.¹ This highly eclectic intellectual trend of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was based on several major developments of the time:

1. the rediscovery of late antique Hermetic and Neoplatonic writings that were later translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino;
2. the reevaluation and recognition of various previously suppressed or neglected forms of medieval magic, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim alike;
3. a new intellectual climate marked by the emergence of various reform ideas and movements.

¹ For a summary discussion of Agrippa's role in Renaissance Neoplatonism see Charles Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 8–115. See also Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, ed. Vittoria Perrone Compagni (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 1–10; Marc Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and his Declamations* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 15–49; and Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels. Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 25–32.

Within this contextual framework, Agrippa wrote his numerous treatises and shaped his doctrines with the single purpose of offering crisis-stricken Western Christianity his own version of spiritual reform. In a nutshell, he merged various elements of the Kabbalah, late antique Hermetic and Neoplatonic doctrines, and medieval magic with Christian teachings, "enriching" them with some elements of these traditions.²

Such an approach to the crisis of Western Christianity was hardly surprising. Agrippa belonged to a generation of humanists immediately following that of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. He was a younger contemporary of Johann Reuchlin, Abbot Johann Trithemius, Francesco Zorzi, and Lodovico Lazzarelli, to mention only a few well-known names. He shared with these humanists, to a greater or lesser degree, a peculiar worldview marked by their attempts to construct syncretic philosophical and theological systems that would unify or reconcile Christianity with the above-mentioned traditions. All such attempts were fundamentally heterodox and eclectic in nature.³ On the other hand, Agrippa was also a contemporary of Desiderius Erasmus, John Colet, Martin Luther, and many others who also sought to reform Western Christianity, but without the aid of non-Christian or heterodox doctrines. Agrippa self-consciously aligned himself with these thinkers as well and this double allegiance presents a major problem for interpreting the German humanist's work and ideas.⁴

² For a comprehensive overview of the intermingling of these traditions see György E. Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation Through Powerful Signs* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 41–151.

³ From a huge body of literature treating the peculiar syncretism of these humanists I mention only a few works most directly related to the topic of this paper: Noel L. Brann, *Trithemius and Magical Theology. A Chapter in the Controversy over Occult Studies in Early Modern Europe* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999); Stephen A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486). The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998); Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Science in the Renaissance. A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Wouter Hanegraaff and R. M. Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005); Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Paola Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance. From Ficino, Pico, Della Porta to Trithemius, Agrippa, Bruno* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁴ Van der Poel's above-mentioned study (see note 1) discusses this "other side" of Agrippa's thought exceptionally well. See also Lewis Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963);

Agrippa von Nettesheim is best known as one of the great Renaissance magi. If not a practicing magician (the available biographical data reveal too little in this respect), he was certainly one of the most important theorists of magic of his time. His main work, the famous *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (Three Books of Occult Philosophy), can be described as a kind of encyclopedia of magic and occultism interpreted within a philosophical framework usually defined as Neoplatonic. The chief goal of the magus, as the author formulates it, is to achieve *spiritual ascension*, that is, to enter the realm of God and his powers and restore man's prelapsarian divine position.⁵ Furthermore, Agrippa proposes magic as the best means to achieve this lofty goal. In articulating his religio-magical program, he relied significantly on the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a well-known late antique collection of theosophical treatises attributed to the legendary figure Hermes Trismegistus. Given the "other side" of Agrippa's thought (that is, the "orthodox" Christian side), one wonders how Christianity fits into this highly unorthodox conceptual framework.

Although intellectual history has granted Agrippa the role of a Renaissance magus (a failed and disappointed one, I should add), a number of his works show distinctly Christian theological features, and some are even purely exegetical.⁶ Recent scholarship has done a lot to bring to light this previously neglected or misinterpreted theological component of Agrippa's thought, which is strongly Christian in argument and tone.⁷ Even his main work, the *De occulta philosophia*, is permeated with instances of biblical exegesis peculiar to his syncretic and eclectic thought.

The claim that Agrippa resorted to Christian doctrine instrumentally, using it merely as a "facade" or a "safety-device" for his heretical teach-

Paola Zambelli, "Magic and Radical Reformation in Agrippa of Nettesheim," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 39 (1976): 69–103; and Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: the Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2–1498* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁵ This is the thesis I argue for in my work *The Pious Impiety of Agrippa's Magic: Two Conflicting Notions of Ascension in the Works of Cornelius Agrippa* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010). See also Szőnyi's concept of exaltation in his *John Dee's Occultism*, 19–37.

⁶ Some examples of Agrippa's exegetical works are his *De originali peccato* and *Dialogus de homine*, as well as the now unfortunately lost commentary on the Epistle to the Romans.

⁷ Marc Van der Poel and Vittoria Perrone Compagni are currently the main proponents of the "re-Christianization" of Agrippa's thought; see Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, passim, and Perrone Compagni's Introduction in Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 1–53.

ings, has long been discarded in scholarship as overly simplistic and inadequate for a number of reasons. In the process of building his attempted synthesis, the German humanist was seriously concerned with the question of orthodoxy. I maintain that, for Agrippa, constructing a whole new mode of Christian orthodoxy, rather than just making his heterodoxy "sound" or "seem" orthodox, was the crucial requirement for his synthesis to work at all.⁸

What are the basic features of Agrippa's "new orthodoxy"? First and foremost, it is based on the standard Ficinian notion of *multiple revelations*. The revelation of Jesus Christ was just the most recent and, admittedly, most sublime confirmation of the original twofold revelation given to Moses and to Hermes Trismegistus.⁹ In several instances Agrippa almost explicitly equated Christ's miracle-working with that of magicians, for the simple reason that he saw magical wonder-working as an indicator of one's spiritual advancement. For a truly illuminated soul, Agrippa believed, it is only natural to perform works of magic and this is the only proper way to understand the miracles of the prophets and the apostles. In other words, magic and Christianity emerged as complementary forms of a single, universal, and primeval spiritual tradition. Furthermore, what goes for Christianity goes for literally every other religious tradition: they all share a common supernatural origin with magic, being nothing but different branches of one and the same ancient revelation.

This bold religio-magical syncretism was the backbone of Agrippa's call for the rehabilitation of magic in the eyes of his Christian audience, but also for the rehabilitation of Christianity itself, which in the eyes of Agrippa and many of his contemporaries had suffered tremendous degradation. With many other fellow humanists, he was convinced that, due mostly to the centuries-long influence of rigid Aristotelian scholasti-

⁸ The "safety-device" argument goes back to Lynn Thondike's *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923–58), 5:129–38, and was influentially echoed in Frances Yates's early works, but even she abandoned it in her *Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 37–47. Nowadays it is almost entirely rejected; see, for instance, Leirich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 41, and Michael H. Keefer, "Agrippa's Dilemma: Hermetic 'Rebirth' and the Ambivalences of *De vanitate* and *De occulta philosophia*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 41.4 (1991): 614–53. However, Paola Zambelli still adheres to this line of interpretation (see below).

⁹ This "myth of a continuous esoteric tradition," as Charles G. Nauert puts it, is analyzed minutely in his "Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18.2 (1957): 161–82.

cism, Western Christianity had almost lost touch with its spiritual roots.¹⁰ One of the symptoms of this loss was the common Christian scornful rejection of magic. Agrippa's intention was to reanimate this nearly-collapsed Christianity, to bring it back to its suppressed "identity," a task that required quite a bit of creative exegesis. As one reads in Agrippa's *Dehortatio gentilis theologiae* (*A Dissuasion against Pagan Theology*, c. 1518), his goal was "to enrich the Church of God with the cleansed writings of the pagans."¹¹ The "cleansing" of these writings was the starting point of Agrippa's exegesis. In much simplified terms, it implied making Hermes Trismegistus theologically compatible with Christ and the apostles although Agrippa was not especially concerned as to whether the doctors of the Church would accept this compatibility.

There is a need for an important remark here. In my view, what Agrippa meant by "enriching the Church of God with the cleansed writings of the pagans" was not Christianizing Hermetism, as is often argued, but rather "Hermeticizing" Christianity. This seemingly minor difference in emphasis conceals an important difference in perspective. The idea that Agrippa sought to Christianize Hermetism implies that the backbone of his religious identification was Hermetic, which would make his allegiance to Christianity a sort of outer layer or protective facade. In other words, this way of thinking would make Agrippa a Nicodemite, an intentionally false Christian, which is what some scholars believe.¹² On the other hand, the idea that Agrippa sought to Hermeticize Christianity implies that he identified with Christianity—that, indeed, he felt himself to be profoundly Christian—even though his understanding of Christianity was highly unconventional and problematic from the standard theological point of view.¹³ The difference pertains to the long-debated question of his religious and intellectual identities. Nowadays there seems to be a considerable scholarly consensus that Agrippa's allegiance to Christianity went far beyond mere declarations and attempts to mask his heretical

¹⁰ Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 50–93.

¹¹ "ecclesiam Dei locupletare repurgatis literis ethnicorum" (*Henrici Cornelii Agrippa ab Nettesheim, armatae militiae equitis aurati et iuris utriusque ac medicinae doctoris operum pars posterior* [Lyon: per Beringos fratres, n.d.], 489–90).

¹² Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic*, 115–88. Her thesis on Agrippa's Nicodemism echoes Thorndike's position, although in a very different context, by linking Agrippa to Radical Reformation. See also Van der Poel, *Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 133–36, on Agrippa's explicit allegiance to Rome.

¹³ See footnote 4.

doctrines.¹⁴

With this delicate distinction in mind, I move on to a close examination of some of the rhetorical approaches the German humanist uses in his treatment of Scripture. When, in the pursuit of his synthesis, Agrippa refers to Christian and non-Christian authorities, both camps appear to be on equal terms, that is, to confirm and support each other. In this context it is particularly interesting to examine Agrippa's treatment of certain biblical obscurities (or what he sees as such) as these could provide him with the opportunity to construct new meanings by selecting and reinterpreting certain passages or phrases.

The two main modes of Agrippa's approach to the Bible are recontextualizing and misquoting. Recontextualizing involves taking a quotation out of its original context and transplanting it into a new context to support one's claim or argument. What follows is both a simple and interesting example of recontextualizing taken from Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, a work which at first glance deals solely with magic and occultism. In the fourth chapter of Book III, the German humanist quotes the Apostle Paul:

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 or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ giving thanks to God the Father through him.*¹⁵

Agrippa thus refers to Colossians 3:17 in a passage on how to practice magic. Agrippa takes the Apostle's words literally—he quite clearly says “whatever you do”—even though the author of the epistle most certainly could not have had in mind the magical practices Agrippa advocates it in his third book (including, among other forbidden procedures, conjurations and necromancy). Notwithstanding this incongruence, and even

¹⁴ In my opinion, this is the position of Van der Poel, Perrone Compagni, and, to some extent, Leirich, although he is not primarily concerned with the problem of Agrippa's orthodoxy. On the other hand, scholars like Keefer and Szőnyi tend to emphasize the unsolvable, paradoxical character of Agrippa's intellectual and religious identity.

¹⁵ “iccirco qui religiosius eruditi sunt nec modicum quodvis opus absque divina invocatione adgrediuntur, sicut ad Coossenses praecipit Doctor gentium iniquiens: *Quaecumque feceritis in verbo aut opere, omnia in nomine Domini Iesu Christi facite, gratias agentes Deo patri per ipsum*” (Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 409). The English translation is taken from Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake, with a commentary by Donald Tyson (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1997), 450. Paul's words are italicized both in Latin and in English.

though this quotation appears at the beginning of Book III, in which he discusses the forms of magic most strongly condemned by the Church, Agrippa concludes that it is perfectly legitimate to practice magic as long as one does it in the name of Jesus Christ—*dixit Paulus!* Thus Agrippa supports his problematic argument with scriptural authority, which plays a crucial role in the rhetorical strategy of his works. This simple example shows the general pattern of theological "cherry-picking" common to all Renaissance eclecticists.

Quotations with minor changes are already interpretations if the changes are significant enough and if one has reason to suspect that they are intentional. No doubt, mistakes are often accidental as medieval and Renaissance authors tend to quote from memory. However, sometimes it is evident that what looks like a *lapsus memoriae* could well be a deliberate alteration.

In Agrippa's case, the matter is further complicated by the fact that, unlike many other humanists of his day, he did not know Greek well.¹⁶ Consequently his studies of the Bible were based on the Vulgate in the same way his readings of Plato and *Corpus Hermeticum* were largely confined to Ficino's translations. Neither Agrippa's works and correspondence nor any known biographical data reveal anything, moreover, about what version or versions of the Vulgate the German humanist read.¹⁷ It may thus be that what in some cases looks like deliberate misquotation is in fact an alternative reading from one of the numerous copies of the Vulgate circulating in Europe at the time. Any analysis of Agrippa's use of biblical references will therefore be tinged with a certain degree of speculation. I believe, however, that we can reduce this element of speculation to an acceptable minimum if the analysis is carefully contextualised and, where possible, strengthened by

¹⁶ This was aptly demonstrated by Nauert, *Agrippa*, 119, who concludes: "For all practical purposes Agrippa's significant readings were confined to books available in Latin, though he may have been able to draw on Hebrew and Greek texts to a limited extent." Agrippa admits this himself in his work *De beatissimae Annae monogamia*, as also shown by Nauert.

¹⁷ See Nauert, *Agrippa*, 116–19. Neither Keefer nor Van der Poel provides any data of this kind in their examinations of Agrippa's use of Biblical references. Even Perrone Compagni's critical editions of the *De occulta philosophia* and *De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* provide no help. Van der Poel cuts this Gordian knot by proposing that "since we don't know which text Agrippa used and since we may assume that he usually (or, at least, occasionally) quoted from memory, it seems best to me to use a modern edition of the Vulgate as point of reference" (personal correspondence, January 28, 2010).

indirect philological evidence. This uncertainty must nevertheless be kept in mind when discussing Agrippa's references to the Bible.

One possible example of creative exegesis hidden in a misquotation is to be found in Agrippa's reference to another famous statement by the Apostle Paul. In the peroration of his second major work, the *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium, atque excellentia verbi Dei declamatio* (*Declamation on the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts, and the Excellence of the Word of God*), Agrippa paraphrases Paul's words as follows: "Therefore remove the veil of your intellect . . . and soon with unveiled face you will climb from glory to glory."¹⁸ However, II Corinthians 3:18 reads slightly differently: "But we all, with unveiled face . . . are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory."¹⁹ Apart from some obviously insignificant changes caused by paraphrasing, one notices that Paul's passive verb *transformamur* ("we are being transformed") is replaced by an active one, *transcenditis* ("you will climb").²⁰ Thus the whole passage acquires a subtly Hermetic—and even Pelagian—tonality. Instead of *being transformed* by God, it is we, by virtue of our own efforts, who *climb* or *transcend* to glory. This difference corresponds closely to the main incongruity between the Christian and the Hermetic paradigms of spiritual ascension—in fact, so closely that one must think of a deliberate alteration, or at least of a semi-conscious

¹⁸ "Amovete ergo nunc velamen intellectus vestri . . . et mox revelata facie transcenditis de claritate in claritatem" (Agrippa, *Operum pars posterior*, 312). The translation is taken from Keefer, "Agrippa's Dilemma," 640. Keefer was the first to bring up this particular example.

¹⁹ "Nos vero omnes, revelata facie . . . in eandem imaginem transformamur a claritate in claritatem" (Biblical text here and elsewhere is taken from *Vulgata Clementina*, <http://vulsearch.sourceforge.net/html/2Cor.html> [last accessed: December 27, 2012]). The translation here and elsewhere is taken from the New American Standard Bible, <http://nasb.scripturetext.com> (last accessed: December 27, 2012), which conveniently renders the Latin *transformamur* as "we are being transformed."

²⁰ *Transformamur* is the Latin translation of Paul's verb μεταμορφούμεθα, which exhibits only the passive meaning in New Testament Greek (see Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000], 639–40). Agrippa's alteration cannot therefore be a philological criticism of the Vulgate based on his insight into the Greek original, especially given his limited knowledge of Greek. For the same reason it seems far-fetched to suppose that any available version of the Vulgate would render the strongly passive verb μεταμορφόμαι the way Agrippa did.

adjustment to the author's own worldview.²¹

One of the most interesting cases of misquotation, or at least dubious quotation, is linked to Agrippa's Hermetic interpretation of the Christian mystery of spiritual rebirth or regeneration. As M. H. Keefer rightly points out, the Hermetic-Christian doctrine of spiritual rebirth is a central tenet of Agrippa's faith. It is the nucleus to which all the other elements of his synthesis were added subsequently. His exegesis of this relatively frequent and relatively obscure notion from the New Testament undoubtedly reveals Hermetic and magical implications.

In his early treatise titled *De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* (*On the Three ways of Knowing God*, 1516), which is usually regarded as the first autonomous expression of his theological views, Agrippa examines the notion that we can know God only through faith. In the course of a long series of quotations and references to biblical and patristic texts, he refers to the expression "to be born (again) from God" used by the Apostle John. There is a curious textual confusion about this reference. In the margin of the 1529 *Opera* edition, published in Antwerp,²² Agrippa writes: "Therefore, John says that such a soul *is born again from God*."²³ He refers the reader to 1 John 3:9, which in fact reads: "No one who is born of God practices sin."²⁴ Since Agrippa personally oversaw the preparations for the printing of the 1529 edition of his *Opera*, this is not likely to be a printer's error. On the basis of this minor alteration Marc Van der Poel seems to suggest that the German humanist added the word *iterum* (again) in order to adjust this biblical reference to the conceptual framework of Neoplatonism and the Hermetic doctrine of spiritual rebirth.²⁵

Indeed, the Johannine reference mentioned in the margin does not contain the word *iterum*, but does the addition of this word really mean that Agrippa was trying to change the theological sense of the quotation? No doubt, such an effort would be in accordance with the general practice of the time, but in this case, I do not think that the alteration was necessarily intentional. There are a few passages in the Gospel of John

²¹ See Keefer, "Agrippa's Dilemma," 639–40.

²² The Hague, Royal Library, 229 G 41.

²³ "Ideo huiusmodi animam Ioannes ait *nasci iterum ex Deo*" (*De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* 5, ed. in Vittoria Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo in Agrippa. Il De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* [Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2005], 144; my translation).

²⁴ "omnis qui natus est ex Deo peccatum non facit."

²⁵ Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian*, 73.

that do contain the word *again*, although in the form *denuo*. The best known is John 3:3: "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"²⁶ This is in reply to Nicodemus the Pharisee, who wonders how can a man enter his mother's womb and be born again. Jesus explains that it means being born of the Spirit and concludes (John 3:7): "Do not marvel that I said to you: 'You must be born again.'"²⁷ One finds a similar expression in 1 Peter 1:23: "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the word of God."²⁸ Thus it might well be that Agrippa had in mind another biblical passage, which did contain the word *again*. In that case, the mistaken reference on the margin remains enigmatic. In other words, it is not always easy to distinguish a mistake from intentional misquotation. However, although the German humanist may have deliberately misquoted less often than thought, some examples clearly reveal such an approach.

The way Agrippa comments on the Johannine reference is explicitly Hermetic and Neoplatonic:

Therefore, John says that such a soul is "born again from God," inasmuch as the light of the supreme God—just like the ray of the Sun, which diminishes its body and turns into a fiery nature—flows down through angelic minds all the way to our soul merged in the body and stimulates it to strip off all its carnality and become a son of God.²⁹

The way Agrippa interprets John's words is remarkable. *In nuce*, the standard Christian understanding of spiritual rebirth implies starting a new life marked by Holy Communion. To be born again is to begin anew in Christ; it implies developing a new nature, new principles, new affections, and new aims. A Christian is born again *ἀνωθεν*, that is both *denuo* (again) and *desuper* (from above). A classical reference for this notion is found in Colossians 3:9:

you laid aside the old self and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.³⁰

²⁶ "Respondit Iesus et dixit ei: amen amen dico tibi nisi quis natus fuerit denuo non potest videre regnum Dei."

²⁷ "Non mireris quia dixi tibi oportet vos nasci denuo."

²⁸ "Renati non ex semine corruptibili sed incorruptibili per verbum Dei."

²⁹ "Ideo huiusmodi animam Iohannes ait 'nasci iterum ex Deo,' siquidem Dei summi lumen – quemadmodum radius solis, corpus attenuans et in igneam convertens naturam – per mentes angelicas usque ad animam nostram defluens, instigat animam carni immersam ut denudata ab omni carnalitate fiat Dei filius" (*De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* 5, 144–46 [my translation]).

³⁰ "Expoliantes vos veterem hominem et induentes novum eum qui renovatur in

One could also think in this connection of Romans 12:2: "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."³¹

In other words, the standard doctrinal understanding of spiritual rebirth implies an *imitatio Christi* so strong that it ultimately changes one's nature. What remains theologically obscure, however, is how far this change goes. What does it imply, in anthropological and eschatological terms, to become the *novus homo* of Saint Paul? It will suffice here to mention the early theological controversies over the issue of the Resurrection and Paul's *σῶμα πνευματικόν* (spiritual body) from 1 Corinthians 15:44 to suggest that from the very beginning the Christian concept of rebirth has been veiled with certain obscurities.³²

It is these obscurities that Agrippa exploits in order to import and legitimize the Hermetic notion of spiritual rebirth, which differs significantly, if not fundamentally, from that of doctrinal Christianity. This Hermetic idea, especially as found in discourses I, IV, VII, and XIII of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, is rigidly dualistic. What needs to be born again is the soul, whereas the body is the principal cause of ignorance and suffering. It is "the odious tunic that strangles you and drags you down," "the garment of ignorance, the foundation of vice, the bonds of corruption, the dark cage, the living death, the sentient corpse, the portable tomb,"³³ and one must rip it off in order to achieve regeneration. Moreover, one finds in discourse XIII an explicit discussion on the immaterial body that closely resembles Paul's "spiritual body," a body that is not different from the soul.³⁴

Another crucial difference between the Christian paradigm and the Hermetic one is that in the latter regeneration serves one sole purpose: that of the soul's becoming god. Hence Agrippa reinterprets John's concept of rebirth by emphasizing the bodily enslavement of the soul and the necessity of stripping off all its carnality. This is why he employs light

agnitionem secundum imaginem eius qui creavit eum."

³¹ "Nolite conformari huic saeculo sed reformamini in novitate sensus vestri."

³² See, for instance, Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 3–6, and Charles Francis Digby Moule, "St. Paul and Dualism: the Pauline Conception of Resurrection," *New Testament Studies* 13 (1965–66): 106–23.

³³ *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction*, ed. and trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24 (discourse VII).

³⁴ *Hermetica*, 49–54.

imagery like Al-Kindi's ray-theory and Plotinus's analogy of the Sun ("just like the ray of the Sun, which diminishes its body and turns into a fiery nature"³⁵) in order to describe the emanation of God's mercy. In other words, Agrippa's exegesis results in a compound of theological opposites so complex that it could easily lead readers into utter confusion—or, on the other hand, provoke them into revisiting some old anthropological obscurities and reopening some early Christian theological controversies. Agrippa certainly hoped for the latter. Whether he managed to avoid the former is an entirely different problem.

³⁵ See the quotation above, footnote 26.



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