**Hermetic Tradition or Catholic Tradition? A Critique of Sebastian Morello**

By Matthew Minerd, Thomas Mirus, and Matthew Scarince

This essay has its origin in a recent controversy over a book by the Catholic philosopher Sebastian Morello, *Mysticism, Magic, & Monasteries: Recovering the Sacred Mystery at the Heart of Reality*. A few writers, one of this essay's authors among them, had raised the alarm over a Catholic author advocating for "magic" and the Hermetic tradition. Morello and his publisher, the well-known traditionalist writer Peter Kwasniewski, then responded in defense of the book's magical terminology. There had not yet, however, been a thorough critical response to Morello's book as a whole.

We decided to present such a critique not so much because the book was likely to be widely influential by itself,[1] but because of the broader intellectual and spiritual trend it represents, as discussed by Thomas Mirus in his original article for *Catholic Culture*, "Occult subversion of traditional Catholicism". However, as this essay was in progress, it was announced that Morello has been appointed Wolfgang Smith Chair of Philosophy at Saint Mary's University Twickenham. The establishment of a new chair in memory of a perennialist thinker[2] whose work involved some of the same motifs we found troubling in Morello's book seems to make it even more urgent to mount a serious challenge to Morello's thought-world and the ancient wisdom it claims to represent.

While the discussion of magic which provoked the initial controversy over *Mysticism, Magic, & Monasteries* is troubling enough in itself, it is also inherently connected to the wider project of the book, which functions as a kind of manifesto proposed to contemporary Catholics. Morello's critique of "rationalism" in the modern Church contains some truth, but is ultimately mounted in service of mere counter-revolution rather than Catholic tradition. He puts forth grand yet unsubstantiated historical narratives which would bypass the Church's tradition as it has actually grown and developed over the centuries. Likewise, he makes extremely problematic ecclesiological claims about the contemporary Church which call into question whether the visible, hierarchical Church, which Christ promised to guide by the Holy Spirit, has much remaining value at all.

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[1] *Mysticism, Magic, & Monasteries* is a collection of articles originally published at *The European Conservative* and then published as a book by Os Justi Press. All but its first chapter and prefaces can be read online. In this essay, all unattributed parenthetical numbers refer to the pages of *Mysticism, Magic, & Monasteries*.

[2] An exposition of Wolfgang Smith's thought is beyond the scope of this work. We are not concerned by the critique of scientism which established his reputation. We will only note that some themes which developed especially in the last two decades of his life resonate either with some of Morello's own problematic claims, or with the errors of the perennialist and esoteric traditions Morello holds dear. For some brief thoughts, see the final note to this article, included as a brief appendix.

**Which Perennial Philosophy?**

Morello prefaces his book with a discussion of his "esoteric, Hermetic, Neoplatonic penchants" (xix), connecting them with the "perennialist traditionalism" for which he has "much sympathy" (xvi). In an appendix, he writes that because of the Church's failure to disseminate her own mystical tradition, "works of 'Catholic perennialists' like Jean Hani, Valentin Tomberg, Jean Borella, Wolfgang Smith, and others will be of the utmost importance for the reevangelisation of the world" (145). He notes that some Catholics are suspicious of perennialism because of its historical connection to "the more unconventional interests of the Renaissance Christian humanists, which included Jewish Kabbalah and practical alchemy" or to Freemasonic occultism, remarking with regret that these Catholics "consider *all* occult knowledge to belong to the dark occult" (xvi).

But his own interest in this philosophy is, he says, "based on little more than an acknowledgment that in man's nature there is wisdom, woven into the very constitution of our species, there from when God wandered with Adam in the Garden" (xvi). Renaissance figures like Pico Della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino worked to "reconcile the natural wisdom they were uncovering in the Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic traditions with the supernatural revelation of which they deemed the Church the true guardian. Later, counter-revolutionaries like Edmund Burke, Louis de Bonald, and Joseph de Maistre…utilized the insights of perennialist traditionalism in defence of Christianity and the civilization it had sacralised and vivified" (xvi).

Hermeticism and Neoplatonism will be discussed later in this essay, but at the outset it is important to give a general outline of the perennialist worldview in which these two traditions are often combined or conflated, as well as its connection with the occult.

The somewhat ambiguous term "perennial philosophy" has been used to refer to the basic, most generally held tenets of the philosophical tradition of the Graeco-Roman-Christian world. Usually, it designates a very basic commitment to epistemological "realism" (that the mind is not wholly constructivist in its grasp of reality),[3] along with some kind of commitment to the metaphysical principles required for this epistemic claim, as well as an affirmation of a foundational moral framework grounded upon such "realism" (classically in the form of theories of virtue and/or the natural law). Admittedly, the expression is historically inexact. However, it has been used by the Magisterium and Catholic authors of merit and, therefore, deserves recognition, even if one must be careful not to act as though a single philosophical "school" in fact maps on to such a supposedly perennial philosophy.

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[3] The terms "realism" and "idealism," though designating important historical trends in philosophy, are arguably rather limited in use for parsing the phenomena to be investigated by a mature philosophy of cognition. Despite his rhetorical excesses, on this point John Deely arguably remains the speculatively strongest critic of such terminology. See, for example, John N. Deely, "Quid sit postmodernismus?" in Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy, ed. Roman T. Ciapalo (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 68–96.

In contrast to this usage, however, is the use of "*philosophia perennis*" and "perennialism" in a very different sense, which has roots in the Renaissance but took on a particular virulent (and increasingly religiously syncretistic) form in the 19th and 20th centuries. Perennialists or members of the Traditionalist School[4] hold that there was an esoteric (hidden) wisdom passed down in the seemingly different exoteric (outward) teachings of all the major ancient religious traditions. At least broadly speaking, this latter "perennialism" is what Morello is referring to when he uses the term. We will concede to him his public claims that he is involved in no occult activities, and we likewise observe that he has not called himself an outright perennialist, but one who values the "insights" of this school. But we nonetheless believe it is very important for readers to be well aware of the dangerous tradition of authorship to which he has rendered himself adjacent by his appeal to Hermeticism and perennialism. In its general lineaments, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue text, "Jesus Christ: The Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age,'" provides a clear statement of the intellectual and religious framework that inspires thinkers who are either directly "perennialist" or closely akin thereto:

> The essential matrix of *New Age* thinking is to be found in the esoteric-theosophical tradition which was fairly widely accepted in European intellectual circles in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was particularly strong in freemasonry, spiritualism, occultism and theosophy, which shared a kind of esoteric culture. In this world-view, the visible and invisible universes are linked by a series of correspondences, analogies and influences between microcosm and macrocosm, between metals and planets, between planets and the various parts of the human body, between the visible cosmos and the invisible realms of reality. Nature is a living being, shot through with networks of sympathy and antipathy, animated by a light and a secret fire which human beings seek to control. People can contact the upper or lower worlds by means of their imagination (an organ of the soul or spirit), or by using mediators (angels, spirits, devils) or rituals.
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> People can be initiated into the mysteries of the cosmos, God and the self by means of a spiritual itinerary of transformation. The eventual goal is *gnosis*, the highest form of knowledge, the equivalent of salvation. It involves a search for the oldest and highest tradition in philosophy (what is inappropriately called *philosophia perennis*) and religion (primordial theology), a secret (esoteric) doctrine which is the key to all the "exoteric" traditions which are accessible to everyone. Esoteric teachings are handed down from master to disciple in a gradual program of initiation.

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[4] When we capitalize "Traditionalist" or "Traditionalism", we refer not to Catholic traditionalism in the colloquial sense, nor specifically to thinkers such as Augustine Bonnetty et al., but to the "Traditionalism" associated with thinkers like René Guénon. Technically, such Traditionalism and perennialism are not completely the same in their claims; however, they share in general trends which justify combining them for the purposes of this essay.

> 19th century esotericism is seen by some as completely secularised. Alchemy, magic, astrology and other elements of traditional esotericism had been thoroughly integrated with aspects of modern culture, including the search for causal laws, evolutionism, psychology and the study of religions. It reached its clearest form in the ideas of Helena Blavatsky, a Russian medium who founded the *Theosophical Society* with Henry Olcott in New York in 1875. The Society aimed to fuse elements of Eastern and Western traditions in an evolutionary type of spiritualism. It had three main aims: (1) "To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, caste or colour"; (2) "To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science"; (3) "To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man."
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> "The significance of these objectives... should be clear. The first objective implicitly rejects the 'irrational bigotry' and 'sectarianism' of traditional Christianity as perceived by spiritualists and theosophists... It is not immediately obvious from the objectives themselves that, for theosophists, 'science' meant the occult sciences and philosophy the *occulta philosophia*, that the laws of nature were of an occult or psychic nature, and that comparative religion was expected to unveil a 'primordial tradition' ultimately modelled on a Hermeticist *philosophia perennis*" (citing Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Nature* [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 448).[5]

The same document's definitions of Hermeticism and Occultism clearly manifest the points of connection between these currents as well:

> Hermeticism: philosophical and religious practices and speculations linked to the writings in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the Alexandrian texts attributed to the mythical *Hermes Trismegistos*. When they first became known during the Renaissance, they were thought to reveal pre-Christian doctrines, but later studies showed they dated from the first century of the Christian era. Alexandrian hermeticism is a major resource for modern esotericism, and the two have much in common: eclecticism, a refutation of ontological

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[5] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue text, "Jesus Christ: The Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age.'" Compare this passage with the following introduction to the Hermetic worldview written by the Catholic Hermeticist A.E. Waite, quoted by Charles Coulombe in an essay cited by Morello: "Beyond these fields and this borderland there lies the legendary wonder-world of theurgy, so called, of Magic and Sorcery, a world of fascination or terror, as the mind which regards it is tempered, but in any case the antithesis of admitted possibility. There all paradoxes seem to obtain actually, contradictions coexist logically, the effect is greater than the cause and the shadow more than the substance. Therein the visible melts into the unseen, the invisible is manifested openly, motion from place to place is accomplished without traversing the intervening distance, matter passes through matter. There two straight lines may enclose a space; space has a fourth dimension, and untrodden fields beyond it; without metaphor and without evasion, the circle is mathematically squared. There life is prolonged, youth renewed, physical immortality secured. There earth becomes gold, and gold earth. There words and wishes possess creative power, thoughts are things, desire realises its object. There, also, the dead live and the hierarchies of extra-mundane intelligence are within easy communication, and become ministers or tormentors, guides or destroyers of man. There the Law of Continuity is suspended by the interference of the higher Law of Fantasia."

> dualism, an affirmation of the positive and symbolic character of the universe, the idea of the fall and later restoration of mankind. Hermetic speculation has strengthened belief in an ancient fundamental tradition or a so-called *philosophia perennis* falsely considered as common to all religious traditions. The high and ceremonial forms of magic developed from Renaissance Hermeticism.
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> Occultism: occult (hidden) knowledge, and the hidden forces of the mind and of nature, are at the basis of beliefs and practices linked to a presumed secret "perennial philosophy" derived from ancient Greek magic and alchemy, on the one hand, and Jewish mysticism, on the other. They are kept hidden by a code of secrecy imposed on those initiated into the groups and societies that guard the knowledge and techniques involved. In the 19th century, spiritualism and the Theosophical Society introduced new forms of occultism which have, in turn, influenced various currents in the *New Age*.

Although Morello is not necessarily adjoined to all aspects of the authors (e.g., Blavatsky) and trends mentioned here, he has associated himself with the basic movement, under the cover of a supposedly straightforward "Neoplatonism" (as though 13th century Latin Catholic theologians could readily be party to modern and contemporary perennialism), but "perennialism" is something much more than this. If Morello wishes to be a responsible Catholic public intellectual, he should take much greater care to spell out the deeply pernicious trends present in the tradition he finds such use for in his writing.

**Rescuing a Defunct Church?**

But what, according to Morello, is the task of Christianity today? "To overcome the black magic of modernity with the sacred magic of the *prisca theologia*, that the unchaining of the Church may begin and its supernatural gifts be delivered once more" (68). In this Hermetic and perennialist way of the ancient theology (*prisca theologia*), we are told, the Church might recover a kind of authentically theocentric and mystical life and thus overcome this "post-authority epoch" in the Church (45, 69). We can only praise the desire that Catholicism be reinvigorated in its practices of the faith and that the mystical life be at the center of Christian existence.[6] Nonetheless, the desire for liturgical and spiritual renewal in the Church cannot be purchased alongside claims such as that "the Church's hierarchy has not only shown *every sign* of celebrating this diabolic trajectory [of the contemporary world], which it doesn't even begin to understand, but even if it became critical of it, it remains *completely* unequipped to engage with

[6] Indeed, one of the authors of the present article himself teaches the so-called "universal call to holiness" as being nothing other than a "universal call to mysticism." See Matthew K. Minerd, *Made by God, Made for God: Catholic Morality Explained* (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2021), 89–96.

the new global regime in the prophetic way that's desperately needed" (54-55, emphases added).[7] It seems that there is very little left amid the tatters of the mystical body, which is hierarchical *of its essence* and in the exercise of its very life as a Church.

Morello's program for renewal is a mélange of recommendations to "double down on the devotional life" (55), to return to a monastic-centric conceptualization of the Church, "to recover the primacy of the mystical in the life of the Church," and in short to "[recapture] the theocentrism on which our civilisation was built" (56). And in service of this nobly described renewal, we are told to turn to Hermes Trismegistus, Pico della Mirandola, and Marsilio Ficino, to Edmund Burke, Louis de Bonald, and Joseph de Maistre (xvi). And, of course, Thomas Aquinas is brought to the table, as an attestation of the orthodoxy of this undertaking. But it is a Thomas who is supposedly better represented by those rather unrecognized readers of his works, Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, than by the "low-grade manuals" that "plagued" Catholic seminary formation for centuries (2, 60, 157). One is shocked to find, upon the pen of a traditionalist Roman Catholic author, the same sorts of simplistic critiques of scholasticism as those that have been lobbed by anti-scholastics within both the West and the Orthodox East.[8]

In point of fact, Morello reads Thomas Aquinas through the hermeneutic of many 20th-century critiques of so-called "neo-Scholasticism,"[9] who would return to the pristine historical Thomas by way of the rather untraditional sidelining of a centuries-long tradition of scholastic inquiry within the heart of the Church.[10] The ultimately untraditional and ahistorical Cartesian

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[7] Likewise, Morello says "the Church remains *utterly unfit*" to solve the West's "meaning crisis," and decries "the *utter sterility* of the institutional Church" in the face of "the collapse of our civilization" (55, emphases added).

[8] The present authors are prepared to critique the excesses of scholasticism. But such critical remarks require more nuance than is afforded by the journalistic methods guiding Morello's rhetorical missiles.

[9] One could pen an immense tome telling the history of the scholastics from the time of the Leonine revival through the Second Vatican Council and realize that the term "neo-Scholastic" does much more to obscure than to illuminate. It includes: initiators of the Leonine revival itself such as Zigliara, Liberatore, Taparelli, Lepidi, et al.; the inheritors of the "Roman School"; Jesuit Suarezianism; the Franciscan recovery of Bonaventure and of the historical works of Scotus (as well as those who continued to engage with the Scotist school); the reforms at the Saulchoir begun under Ambroise Gardeil; various educators and "manualists" such as Adoph Tanquerey, Édouard Hugon, Jean-Marie Hervé, Christian Pesch, Tillman Pesch, and many others; Spanish scholastics such as Juan Arintero, Francisco Marin-Sola, Santiago Ramirez; thinkers whom Morello does cite warmly, such as Geiger, Fabro, Clarke, Wippel, and Doolan (all of whom remain, in the end, figures writing in the context of the post-Leonine revivals); Roman theologians of various calibers such as Billot, Parente, Boyer, Tromp, et al.; the medievalism of Gilson along with the eventual "existential" Thomism often associated with him; Garrigou-Lagrange and his various protégés and associates (all deeply connected with centuries of Dominican Thomism); the "Laval" Thomism associated with Charles de Koninck and his followers; Maritain, Labourdette, Jean-Hervé and Marie-Joseph Nicolas, Yves Simon, and others whose Thomism was a mélange of an older commentatorial Thomism mixed with contemporary engagement; the great sacramental theologian and dogmatician Emmanuel Doronzo; and the list could go on. Our point is merely this: to simplify several centuries of Catholic thought (and here we mention figures only going back into the-19th century) so that one can readily dismiss most of such figures as being bewitched by modernity is either historically ignorant or motivated by a counter-revolutionary spirit that wishes to establish orthodoxy of a newly defined "year zero" ground that would, supposedly, be a recovery of a lost tradition.

[10] Despite his citation, at least in podcast interviews, of the Salmanticenses, a lack of deference to the Thomist tradition seems to be his normal *modus operandi*. In speaking of Thomas and his modern commentators

presuppositions of such a method were well diagnosed by John Deely in his article, "Quid sit postmodernismus?"[11] It is surprising to find such methods implied in the writings of a defender of tradition—at least until one takes seriously the deeper implications of Traditionalist and perennialist thought. Tradition is, we suppose, dead, lost, and in need of sage esoteric guides. Following his perennialist and Traditionalist forebears, Morello critiques modernity and the post-Tridentine Church in order to seek out the unsullied, pre-modern Tradition that must, it seems, be raised from the dead.

What is the justification for this dire call to abandon the contemporary Church in order to search out the true sources of life in a supposed past? It is the fact that the Church is living in a "post-authority epoch." We are told that "what is now left is power, and a craving for power within a petty and dying bureaucracy," habitually exercised in an arbitrary fashion (69). If Morello's rhetoric is taken seriously, it would seem that a Renaissance mosaic of Hermes Trismegistus in Siena better indicates the "theocentric path of wonder" than the entire contemporary hierarchy, whose "authority…has manifestly been lost" (49). Painted with Morello's broad brushes, it does not shoulder its mission, *unqualifiedly* failing in the sanctification of the faithful: "There is no chance of that [recovery], though, until the hierarchy is freed from the bewitchment of modernity, to take up its mission once more of sanctifying the faithful and making disciples of all nations, rather than yielding to the unbaptised world—which is the principality of Satan, and that mission's incessant enemy" (80). Now, one can only "take up" what one has put down. It is a wonder to read a faithful Catholic baldly implying that "the hierarchy" has put down its sanctifying mission. No Catholic should speak in such unqualified words, even when writing in a journalistic mode. The current failures of the hierarchy can never justify exaggeration to the point of mendacity.

Pushed to their extreme, these claims are imbued not merely with the logic of sedevacantism but—at least in their ultimate implications—with that of an almost universal

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(with modernity seeming to mean something other than recent history), we are told, "Indeed, perhaps no other premodern author has so suffered the indignity of posthumously having modernity read into his works." Similarly, without any citation or detailed textual proof, John of St. Thomas is accused of "at times exhibit[ing] a liking for both mechanical and vertical metaphors that are not to be found in the writings of Aquinas" (156). The accusation of such mechanism and spatiality are clearly meant to imply a kind of modernity which sullies the thought of John of St. Thomas. In the end, Morello's chosen hermeneutic should lead to the rejection of the Salmanticenses (and many others too, for they would all be judged to be sullied by modernity). Indeed, such has been the logic of many scholars during the past century, for whom the later scholastic tradition was ultimately perversion and occlusion to be extirpated. In someone who claims the merits of tradition, such an attitude would be curious indeed, were it not for the fact that what is in question is not, in point of fact, *tradition* but, rather, *counter-revolution*.

It should also be noted that, in the immediate context of the remark about John of St. Thomas above, Morello makes claims regarding the natural virtues and grace that seem truly perplexing for one who is aware of the nuanced treatment of nature-grace issues within the Thomist school, both in view of the operation of *gratia sanans*, as well as in regard to the theology of the infused moral virtues and their various relationships with the acquired moral virtues. However, rather than docility to a tradition, he seems to have chosen counter-revolutionary narrativizing.

[11] See John Deely, "Quid sit postmodernismus," in *Postmodernism and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Roman T. Ciapalo (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 68–96

hierarcho-vacantism. One is prevented from saying "completely universal" only by the presumption that Morello retains some small list of traditionalist hierarchs whom he believes defend the Credo of Catholic Tradition.

This choice to deem the contemporary Church unauthoritative leads Morello to engage in repeated rhetorical bombast against the living hierarchy in a way that is arguably counter to Christian truthfulness, observance, obedience, and charity. Legitimate criticism of ecclesial leaders—and we will not deny that there are causes for concern and criticism in the contemporary Church—should be marked with the savor of Christian patience alongside the firmness of prophetic witness. One should tremble when one arrogates to oneself the supposed right to publicly and prophetically denounce the entire hierarchy. For every legitimate prophet there are a thousand false sectarians. One should not be all too confident that one is not numbered among the latter. Morello, however, seems quite assured of his rights to proclaim public Jeremiads against the hierarchy. To be frank, the entire exercise—reflective of much Roman Catholic traditionalist rhetoric—smacks of black-and-white narratives enabling one to divide the world into *clear and distinct* camps of the reprobate and the righteous which could be identified by human eyes, at least if one has the supposedly correct anti-modern optic.

It should be noted, at least in passing, that Morello also has rather harsh words for what he takes to be the evils of clericalism and clericalization more broadly. Instead of carefully and discretely considering the source of certain modern over-valorizations of the priest as a kind of "super-Christian" (e.g., under the influence of the positions held by certain exponents, often saintly, of the "French School" of priestly spirituality) and the loss of an institution of mature spiritual fatherhood, he resorts, instead, to global comments about the priesthood that are, at the very least, offensive to pious ears, especially when publicly aired with the tone that Morello has chosen to use.[12] Merely to cite several exemplary texts:

> Sadly, that kind of stupidity [of turning from elders to experts] has its analogue in the Church, too. It is disheartening to see how vulnerable Christian faithful, especially women, gather round a newly ordained priest as if he is some kind of oracle who can, at the drop of a word, transform the lives of those who dote on him. This error is in fact the same as the error that causes people to place themselves in the hands of therapists, but only this time with a religious veneer. Whereas in the former example, the therapist is thought to bypass experience and embodied knowledge by way of a qualification, the young priest is thought to do so by way of his ordination. It is thought that, somehow, whatever he has received by supernature isn't going to transform his nature but circumvent it altogether. This inversion of Christian anthropology, which supposes that some "special grace" can aptly substitute for the unfolding of human experience in time, comes from the kind of abstractionism that is the hallmark of the modern mind. Thus, one

[12] Compounding the scandal, the articles making up Morello's book were originally published for a partly non-Catholic audience. It is hard to see why anyone would want to enter the Church if he only had Morello's comments about the hierarchy's lack of authority to go on.

> can see how what often passes for traditional Christian piety and obedience might be nothing more than the deleterious assumptions of modernity masquerading as true religion" (127).
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> Since then, the Church has continued to recruit the most unremarkable, bourgeois managers into its clerical ranks, and by so doing her culture has completely changed—by which I mean nothing complimentary (110).
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> Meanwhile, the Church from its highest echelons to the local diocese has been riddled with petty clericalism, law-breaking, sexual abuse, and general moral and financial corruption. Anyone who follows Catholic journalism will be well aware of the depth of the rot. For a long time, many members of the Catholic clergy have been practising homosexuals who could not in good conscience preach the Faith, and so largely limited themselves to managing ecclesiastical decline—and were often content to say as much (48).

One is at least justified in marveling at such an exhibition from the pen of a follower of Joseph de Maistre (known to have Masonic and Martinist sympathies) as he inveighs against what he judges to be clericalism to be extirpated. The authors of the present article are not unaware of the deficiencies and sins—sometimes immensely profound ones—committed by lay and hierarchy in the contemporary Church. Yet we are also fare to aware of the existence of too many good Catholics to allow such claims—"riddled with…"—to go unchallenged. Such comments are an insult to many good priests who devotedly serve the faithful amid a very confused era.

**Hermeticism, Magic, Neoplatonism**

Morello presents himself as a rather boring and textbook traditionalist Catholic, attending the liturgy, praying his rosary and reciting the Jesus prayer, singing old English folk songs with his family, hunting in the countryside, and swinging a mace like a medieval knight in order to get in his pre-modern exercise. But it should also be noted that in the immediate context of his written call to Christian Hermeticism, we receive a brisk defense of pre-modern theories of healing through the presences of crystals and precious metals, founded on the authority of Ss. Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Hildegard of Bingen. And without clear delineation of interpretive meaning or prescriptive recommendation, he quotes an account offered by Charles Coulombe in what Morello refers to as "a remarkable essay," in which Coulombe cites a number of scholastic "ultra-realists,"[13] remarking that "many of [them] looked to Alchemy, Astrology,

[13] We set aside here whether or not this philosophical appellation of "ultra-realist" is sufficiently pliable to describe adequately all of the figures listed by Morello and Coulombe: John Scotus Eriugena, Pope Sylvester II, William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon, Bl. Raymond Lully, St. Bonaventure, and St. Albert the Great.

and the Qabalah as a means of interpreting the revelation implicit in creation—a revelation supplementary, but inferior, to Holy Writ" (74). One is shocked to find a number of saints enlisted to *explicitly Kabbalistic* [14] ends that none of the mainstream of their spiritual sons and daughters have followed. One would expect that someone as monastically inclined as Morello would primarily turn us toward the writings of medieval Cistercians and Benedictines. Theirs was a primarily scriptural imagination which, to whatever degree it might have connections with Neoplatonic thought, [15] nonetheless was quite distant from the temptations of Christian Kabbalism and Hermeticism.

Nonetheless, we are told that Hermeticism is simply a "set of practices and disciplines of mind, will, and imagination that habituate the practitioner to a vision of the world that acknowledges it as God's Icon" (71). At face value, perhaps it is nothing more than a bit of poetic Neoplatonic philosophical therapy giving rise to a traditional liturgical life that reenchants one's vision. Specifics are wanting, however, so we find ourselves left wondering: What are such practices, historically? How do they relate to the counsels of the saints, mystics, ascetics, and theologians who think from *within the bosom of the Church* and her various liturgical traditions, rather than *from within the school of Iamblichus and Hermes Trismegistus*?

Since the vast majority of Catholic readers will never even have heard of Hermetic magic before, their reaction to its proposal in vague and philosophically abstract terms will depend almost entirely on their personal gut instincts, and whether they already trust or distrust Morello or his publisher Kwasniewski. As Morello has not provided enough information for the reader to judge for himself, it will behoove us to do so here with a look at the history of Catholic reception of Hermeticism, as well as the Neoplatonism linked with it by Morello and his peers.

Throughout the book, Morello tries to reassure Catholics by name-dropping (often with little to no elaboration) various past Catholic figures who supposedly "adopted the Hermetic path." The roster is mostly summed up in the above-mentioned quote from Coulombe:

> The meeting of Hermeticism (the belief that the visible world is an analogy of the invisible, summed up in the phrase "as above, so below") and Neoplatonism (with its insistence that the Platonic Archetypes were the realities, of which earthly expressions were mere shadows) with Christianity produced several waves of educated folk who shared this magical concept of the world. First came such Neoplatonic Church Fathers as

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[14] In this essay, we are not distinguishing the spellings of Kabbalah, Cabala, and Qabalah to indicate specifically Jewish, Christian, or Hermetic meanings, though the reader should be aware of these subdistinctions within this interrelated tradition.

[15] This comment is not intended to establish a facile opposition between Scriptural and Hellenic thought. For reasons often repeated by Pope Benedict XVI (and others), such a dichotomy is fruitless dogmatically, speculatively, and historically. (For recent reflections on this theme, see Lewis Ayres, *Christological Hellenism: A Melancholy Proposal* [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2024].) Rather, we only wish to point out that, in the great Benedictines and Cistercians, the influence of Neoplatonism is clearly directed by the influence of the Scriptural reflection undertaken by, and for, monks for whom the liturgy of the hours and *lectio divina* provided the ballast of the spiritual life.

> St. Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and St. Augustine. Then came the Ultra-Realist scholastics such as John Scotus Eriugena, Pope Sylvester II, William of Auvergne, Roger Bacon, Bl. Raymond Lully, St. Bonaventure, and St. Albertus Magnus, many of whom looked to Alchemy, Astrology, and the Qabalah as a means of interpreting the revelation implicit in creation—a revelation supplementary, but inferior to, Holy Writ. Lastly, the Classical Humanists such as Reuchlin, Pico della Mirandola, Cardinal Bessarion and Aeneas Piccolomini were similarly inclined. The Reformation put an end to most such developments (74).

Some of these are saints, Fathers or Doctors of the Church who are alleged to have made their own a Hermetic-magical view of the world; others are non-canonized Catholic Hermeticists of the past, whom we are supposed to take for granted are safe models to imitate. Space will not permit the examination of all of these figures, but we will touch on a few in the course of this section.

Likewise, we will need to examine Morello's language about "magic," which has been the central item of controversy over his book. Morello puts the Mass and other Christian practices within the category of magic, calling them "sacred magic" or "baptized theurgy":

> The Western world has always believed in magic. It has always held that curses exist and that they can be placed on people, animals, fungi, and inanimate objects. And the Western world has always held that such curses can be banished by special words, special objects, and special concentration, which in that order it has been content to call "blessings," "sacramentals," and "prayer." In short, even the most orthodox in the West have always believed what the Hermeticist calls the opposing forces of "goetia," or black magic, and "theurgy," or sacred magic—though they generally would not put it in such terms (90).

Christianity had from its earliest days an ambivalent relationship with the "magic" of the Hellenistic World. The *ars magicaris* was directly associated with the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, whose philosophers and priests were believed to have communicated their beliefs to the priests and prognosticators of ancient Greece and Rome. These speculations about a chain of ancient wisdom, delivered from the gods (or God in the case of Zoroaster) form the tenuous basis of the claims of a "Hermetic" tradition—Hermes, known to the Romans as Mercury, was believed to have transmitted his knowledge to the ancient Egyptians under the divine form of their god Thoth.[16]

Many early Christians accepted these claims, or rather, believed in a kind of reversal of them—it was not the god Hermes who gave knowledge to the Egyptians in the guise of Thoth, but rather the Egyptian man Hermes who had been deified by pagans because of his renown and

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[16] For more information, see Lynn Thorndike's *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, particularly Chapters 10: "Spurious Mystic Writings of Hermes, Orpheus, and Zoroaster" and 45: "Hermetic Books in the Middle Ages."

fame as a man of philosophy.[17] In his apologetical works, the 2nd-century Church Father Clement of Alexandria expounds on this idea: "Of those, too, who at one time lived as men among the Egyptians, but were constituted gods by human opinion, [was] Hermes the Theban…" Such a marvelous fate requires an explanation, and Clement had several ready at hand:

> But some of these thieves and robbers, as the Scripture says,[18] predicted for the most part from observation and probabilities, as physicians and soothsayers judge from natural signs; and others were excited by demons, or were disturbed by waters, and fumigations, and air of a peculiar kind (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* I: 21).

It is worth noting that the explanations he presents are not entirely negative; Hermes and other men deified by the gentiles are granted a capacity for natural prediction. Clement and other Christians were not wholly dismissive of the reputations for marvels that such names as Hermes "the Thrice-Great" evoked, nor were they simply ready to consign their activities to the intervention of demons. The Persian magi were famed as astrologers, and the terms "mathematician" and "magician" had become virtually synonymous. But the emphasis on prognostication, on the reading of fates (this is the *mantia* or "prophecy" that forms the second half of the compound "necromancy"), and auguries of the wills of the gods, in the Hellenistic world the most sought after form of "magic" after protective charms and spells, obviously did not sit well with the Christian doctrines of Divine Providence and Omnipotence. Nor were pagan boasts about the ability to command "daemons," spirits, lightly overlooked.

In the fourth century, the 36th canon of the Synod of Laodicea forbade members of the clergy from dabbling in such disreputable arts. By the sixth century, as Christianity competed fiercely with paganism over the remnants of the Roman Empire, the identification with the demonic and with pagan religious rituals had become more firmly solidified. St. Isidore of Seville in his encyclopedic *Etymologies* lists the *magi* after the Greek philosophers and sybils, and paints a less than flattering portrait of their undertakings:

> This foolery of the magic arts held sway over the entire world for many centuries through the instruction of the evil angels. By a certain knowledge of things to come and of things below, and by invoking them, divinations (*aruspicium*) were invented, and auguries, and those things that are called oracles and necromancy (St. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* VIII ix 3).

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[17] The belief that Hermes was the source of an ancient wisdom tradition, the *prisca theologia* existing in all religions, was based on the legend that he was an ancient Egyptian priest; some early Christians believed that he had foreseen the coming of Christianity. In the Renaissance, he was thought to have been a contemporary of Moses, but the supposedly primordial authority of the Hermetic Corpus was severely undermined when it was shown to be not the writing of an ancient Egyptian priest, but a product of the post-Christian Hellenistic period.

[18] A clear reference to John 10:1 "Amen, amen I say to you: He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up another way, the same is a thief and a robber." The pagan mystics are thereby equated to the false prophets or heretics who lead the Christian flock astray.

Clement recounts in his *Stromata* that 42 books were ascribed to Hermes, though it is uncertain whether any of these works survived into the medieval collection of texts commonly referred to as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. What is certain, however, is that this surviving corpus is embedded in a deeply gnostic and dualistic worldview. This can be most clearly seen in the text entitled *The Secret Dialogue of Hermes to his son Tat,* in which the author speaks of a "material god" opposed to an "incorporeal god," a "god" which is "beautiful but not good."[19] This anti-material mindset is carried over into the more famous Hermetic texts, including *The Emerald Tablet* and *The Perfect Discourse with Asclepius*.

Both of these texts were known to the 13th century Doctor of the Church, St. Albert the Great, and on the basis of his knowledge of these texts it has been alleged by some that he was therefore a disciple of Trismegistus—Morello calls him a "dedicated Hermeticist and astrologer" (59). Yet to anyone familiar with his works, it is clear that he followed the distinction laid out by his contemporary William of Auvergne, who distinguished between "natural magic" or the knowledge of the hidden properties of nature through experimentation and observation, and other forms of "ritual magic" or necromancy—a distinction later exploited by Renaissance Hermeticists who advocated ritual magic under the name of natural magic.

The necromantic kind of magic was to be found chiefly in the *Ars notoria*, a book of rituals condemned by St. Thomas Aquinas (c.f. ST II-II, q. 96, a. 1), and in the Hermetic corpus. (St. Thomas's references to Hermes, too, are habitually negative.) That St. Albert was solely a practitioner of the former and not the latter is quite evident from his writings on the proto-typical "magicians," the Biblical Magi:

> For the Magi indeed are neither astrologers, nor enchanters, nor malefactors, nor necromancers, nor fortunetellers, nor haruspices, nor diviners. But the Magi, properly called, are great men who having knowledge of all necessary things and conjecturing from effects of nature sometimes predict and sometimes bring about the marvels of nature.... None of the Magi were devoted to magic, save in the way that has been described here, and this laudably (St. Albert the Great, *Commentaries on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, II).

His assessment of the works attributed to Hermes follows the same pattern as that of Clement, that is to say that he appreciates and uses the writings on the natural properties of creatures while rejecting and correcting the false philosophical underpinnings (this is most clearly evident in several chapters in *De mineralibus*).[20] Any notions of the Hermeticists

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[19] See *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32.

[20] See also St. Albert's *Speculum Astronomiae* (English translation in *The* Speculum Astronomiae *and Its Enigma: Astrology, Theology and Science in Albertus Magnus and his Contemporaries*, trans. Paola Zambelli, 2013), in which he warns against several books attributed to Hermes: "In fact, my spirit was never tranquil when dealing with these; all the same, I wanted to observe them well whilst passing over them so that, at least, I might not be ignorant of how to ridicule their wretched believers, and I might have taken something from their own work with

regarding the physical world that did not conform to his own observations and experiments he easily discarded. His "astrology" was not a theurgic or magical practice (see his disapproval of astrologers in the quote above), but based on scientific theories about the physical effects of the heavenly bodies on the four humors affecting human dispositions.[21] His works represent a pioneering effort into the systematic *scientia* that would come into full blossom in the Early Modern era under the Jesuits, and his argumentation often leads to surprisingly modern conclusions (as in his book on *The Climates* where he defends the unpopular hypothesis of the existence of antipodean men). This is a far cry from the Hermetic mystagogy attributed to him in Morello's writings. Unlike Morello, St. Albert never uses "magic" as a framework to explain Catholic spirituality, sacraments, and holy objects.

In Morello's thought, Hermeticism is closely accompanied by and even conflated with Neoplatonism, the latter being related to the former as theory is to practice (except that Neoplatonism also had its own magical practice in *theurgy*). The basis for Morello's stress on Neoplatonism as key to a Catholic revival is the claim that it provided "the vital framework within which Patristic theology developed" (43). The Neoplatonism of certain Church Fathers is often overstated today: for instance, it is not obvious that just because St. Augustine was influenced by the Neoplatonists, he therefore *was* a Neoplatonist (for of course, he criticized them severely as well). However, we would not want to deny the influence of this Greek philosophy on a number of Fathers, especially in the East. However, even in the case of a quintessentially Neoplatonist figure such as St. Dionysius the Areopagite, there is a good argument to be made that his thought is primarily and profoundly Christian.[22]

Modern scholarship has also tended to exaggerate the fundamental influence of Neoplatonism on Christianity by reversing their historical relationship. The consensus accounts, that Christianity one-sidedly borrowed from a pagan, Neoplatonic vocabulary to express its own mysticism and philosophy, are slowly being overturned or at least significantly complicated by

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which I might repel their excuses, and — what was most important — so that I would not be tempted concerning similar things from another when I had judged that the necromancer's invalid arguments should not be accepted" (243).

[21] To see that St. Albert's "astrology" (like his conception of "natural magic" generally) was conceived in what we would today call "scientific" terms, held in the context of God's governance, read pgs. 221 and 223 of the English translation of St. Albert's *Speculum Astronomiae*, ibid.

[22] See the works cited on page 54 of Ayres, *Christological Hellenism*. Of particular interest is Panagiotis G. Pavlos's contrast between Iamblicus and Dionysius in "Theurgy in Dionysius the Areopagite," in *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity*, ed. Panagiotis G. Pavlos et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 151–180. Also, see Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita*, ed. Bogdan G. Bucer (Collegeville: Cistercian Publications / Liturgical Press, 2014). One wishes that Morello and his fellow laborers would remain far closer to the positions found in St. Dionysius. The orthodox reception of his theology would provide everything they are legitimately seeking, with no need for dubious, reactionary perennialist and Traditionalist sources. The more orthodox Christological and liturgical dicta of Morello are undermined by ambiguous appeals to other "hermeticist" sources and language which do not receive sufficient criticism.

the most recent research. The ancient record, meanwhile, has always suggested that Christianity influenced Neoplatonism.

The philosophical milieu by the time this movement emerged in the 3rd century was already in many ways deeply Christian, and indeed Neoplatonism may have formed directly under Christian influence. The first and greatest Neoplatonist writer, Plotinus, was taught by one Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria. According to Eusebius and St. Jerome, Ammonius was a lifelong Christian, while Plotinus's student Porphyry claimed that Ammonius had been raised by Christians but apostatized into paganism after studying Greek philosophy.[23] Either version of the story attests to the influence of Christianity on the pagan Neoplatonists, making sense of those elements of the latter (such as its quasi-Trinity) which loosely resemble the former.[24]

But if, on Porphyry's account, the precursor or founder of Neoplatonism was a former Christian who was led by Greek philosophy into a quasi-Christianized paganism, then we would find in Ammonius Saccas the prototype of various Christian thinkers in the ancient world, the Renaissance, and modernity, who would be led down a similar path by excessive Neoplatonic influence[25]—if not to a quasi-Christianized paganism, then at least to a paganized Christianity. These include some of the figures listed by Coulombe and Morello as proof of the pedigree of a blend of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism within the Church.

For instance, brilliant and influential as Origen was, it is particularly bizarre to cite him in this regard, given that he was condemned as a heretic by an Ecumenical Council (2nd Constantinople) precisely for those views of his which most closely resembled Neoplatonism: such as the pre-existence of souls and their subsequent fall into bodies, and apokatastasis (the ultimate restoration of all creatures, including the demons, to union with God).[26]

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[23] Eusebius, History of the Church, vi, 19: "For Ammonius, being a Christian, and brought up by Christian parents, when he gave himself to study and to philosophy straightway conformed to the life required by the laws." Based on the disagreements between the ancient sources, some scholars have concluded that there were two different teachers named Ammonius, one pagan and the other Christian. Ammonius is also said to have been the teacher of Origen (and there is even confusion about whether there were also two Origens, again one pagan, the other Christian!). But it is plausible, based on the Neoplatonic and pagan elements in the Christian Origen's thought, that even if there were two Origens, both were taught by the same Ammonius Saccas.

[24] St. Augustine argued that Porphyry, though more evidently hostile to Christianity than his master Plotinus, abandoned key tenets of his paganism even in the course of his anti-Christian polemics. *The City of God* Book 10, Chapter 26: "I know not how it is so, but it seems to me that Porphyry blushed for his friends the theurgists; for he knew all that I have adduced, but did not frankly condemn polytheistic worship."

[25] A century after Ammonius, the Emperor Julian the Apostate would abandon Christianity, attempting to replace it with Neoplatonism and theurgic ritual.

[26] Even Clement of Alexandria, also cited by Coulombe and once considered a saint, had his cult suppressed in 1605 (removed from the Roman Martyrology and dropped from the calendar) by Pope Clement VIII, a decision later upheld by Pope Benedict XIV "on the grounds that Clement's life was little known, that he had never obtained public cultus in the Church, and that some of his doctrines were, if not erroneous, at least suspect." The point is not that Catholics ought not read Clement, but that merely invoking his name is no evidence of the safety of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism.

A similar example is the Renaissance thinker Pico della Mirandola, whom Morello cites as an inspiration in his preface, mistakenly claiming that St. Thomas More called Pico "a perfect philosopher and a perfect theologian."[27] A number of Pico's views were formally condemned by Pope Innocent VIII as heretical, scandalous, and reviving pagan errors.[28] As J. M. Rigg describes in his introduction to More's translation of the *Life of Pico*, Pico's beliefs were outright syncretistic, as he conflated the Son of God with a created Demiurge, and denied that God created anything else directly.[29]

Interestingly, one would be hard-pressed to find a Catholic Aristotelian philosopher who accepts Aristotle's erroneous belief in the eternity of the world. Yet among modern Christians who have professed a Neoplatonic-Hermetic worldview, like Valentin Tomberg, David Bentley Hart, and others, one will often find the Neoplatonic heresies of necessary emanationism, the pre-existence of souls, and universalism/apokatastasis.

While to his credit, Morello is no universalist, he repeatedly affirms "emanation" without explaining in sufficient metaphysical detail what he means by the term. Although it can be understood in an orthodox sense, referring to the causal dependence of all things upon God (as St. Thomas Aquinas and others used the term), it remains sufficiently proximate to pantheist and panentheist views of god, as well as to claims that creation is a necessary outflow from God's essence, to call for careful clarification when the term is used—especially when an author like

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[27] Morello, *Mysticism, Magic, & Monasteries*, xv. Morello cites the saint in order to lend legitimacy to his and Pico's Hermetic interests, but these are not More's words, but the words of Pico's nephew in a biography translated by More when he was 26 years old. Further, More's translation actually removed references to Kabbalah and magic that were in the original work. The young More also translated some short works by Pico, which have a moral and pious rather than speculative bent. He showed no interest in Pico's esoteric and magical side. (In this essay, we are not distinguishing the spellings of Kabbalah, Cabala, and Qabalah to indicate specifically Jewish, Christian, or Hermetic meanings, though the reader should be aware of these subdistinctions within this interrelated tradition.)

[28] See *The WM Review*, "Pope Innocent VIII's condemnation of Pico della Mirandola's book of 900 propositions." While some claim that the condemnation of Pico's propositions were lifted, this is inaccurate: he was only judged innocent of formal (that is, personally culpable) adherence to heresy. (We cite *The WM Review*'s articles on Pico and St. Thomas More for their well-sourced research, while not subscribing to that publication's sedevacantism.)

[29] This despite a weak and confused protestation to the contrary. In his introduction to More's translation of *The Life of Pico della Mirandola*, J.M. Rigg, describes and quotes Pico's theology (22): "Here we find God described consistently with the doctrine of the 'De Ente et Uno' as 'ineffable elevated above all intellect and cognition,' while beneath Him, and between the intelligible and the sensible worlds is placed 'a creature of nature as perfect as it is possible for a creature to be,' whom God creates from eternity, whom alone He immediately creates, and who 'by Plato and likewise by the ancient philosophers, Mercury Trismegistus and Zoroaster is called now the Son of God, now Mind, now Wisdom, now Divine Reason.' Here we have a fusion and confusion of the 'selfsufficing and most perfect God' created by the Demiurge of Plato's Timaeus to be the archetype of the world, the Son of God of Philo and later theosophists, and the Νους of Plotinus, the first emanation of the Godhead. This Son of God, however, Pico bids us observe, is not to be confounded with the Son of God of Christian theology, who is Creator and not creature, but may be regarded as 'the first and most noble angel created by God.'"

Morello uses it in such close context to philosophers who, in fact, have been guilty of these or similar errors.

However, nothing would be amiss if we were to find that certain phrases and philosophical expressions had been borrowed from the Neoplatonists by the early Church, just as many of Aristotle's expressions are still used by Christian metaphysicians today. The problem arises in the borrowing of specific concepts condemned by Patristic witness, such as "theurgy." This kind of activity is very clearly condemned by Augustine in *The City of God*:

> Moreover, [the miracles of the saints] were wrought by simple faith and godly confidence, not by the incantations and charms composed under the influence of a criminal tampering with the unseen world, of an art which they call either magic, or by the more abominable title necromancy, or the more honorable designation theurgy; for they wish to discriminate between those whom the people call magicians, who practise necromancy, and are addicted to illicit arts and condemned, and those others who seem to them to be worthy of praise for their practice of theurgy — the truth, however, being that both classes are the slaves of the deceitful rites of the demons whom they invoke under the names of angels (St. Augustine, *The City of God* Book X, Chapter 9).

Augustine's argument is simple: the good angels cannot be commanded by humans (as the theurgist desires) to fulfill our material wants or intellectual wishes, therefore those who fulfill them are the devils, with a false pretense of submission.

Morello, however, makes the distinction rejected above by Augustine. Theurgy as such is defined as a "sacred magic" categorically opposed to "black magic" (90). But unbaptized theurgy is insufficiently powerful: "Christians…have ever believed in sacred magic, or 'theurgy,' but they have held that such magic possesses the power to conquer demons and sacralise the world only when united to the eternal and singular priesthood of Jesus Christ, and to this baptized theurgy Christians have given the name of *liturgy*" (4).

His sole justification for the positive use of "theurgy" is that the term "was repeatedly deployed to discuss Christian worship by…St. Dionysius the Areopagite" (38), However, Dionysius uses this word in a markedly different sense than that of the predominant users of the term: pagan Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and his followers down the centuries, who sought to summon and manipulate gods and spirits.[30] Nor, despite Dionysius's great influence, was his positive use of the term theurgy received by the Church.

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[30] Panagiotis Pavlos, in a chapter in *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity* (Taylor and Francis, 2019) writes that "Dionysius' premises on matter remain radically different from that of Neoplatonism, both in terms of the sacramental tradition he recapitulates and the wider Christian metaphysical contours he adheres to." Also see the sources cited in note 22 above.

Pavlos summarizes his position with clarity in "Dionysius the Areopagite: A Christian Theurgist," Abstract of Paper presented at the 15th Annual Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Palacky University, Olomou (Czech Republic), June 14–17, 2017:

Morello can defend himself by saying he uses *theurgy* simply as a broad term for religious ritual, just as we discuss pagan and Christian forms of *sacrifice*, a universal reality of natural religion which nonetheless only takes a God-pleasing and effective form in Christianity.[31] We might then object only to what we deem, in the case of *theurgy*, to be inappropriate terminology, had Morello limited himself to recommending orthodox Christian practices rather than appealing to a particular magical tradition. Unfortunately, he goes further, in what is the book's clearest example of praising dangerous occult practices.

At first, Christian theurgy seems just to mean the Sacrifice of the Mass: "By Christian theurgy, I mean the fulfilment of all religious sacrifice, during which those offering the sacrifice

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> The scope of what is about to be presented in this paper expands over the following hypothesis. Despite the linguistic affinities and the several conceptual appropriations, Dionysius' premises remain radically different from Neoplatonism, both in terms of the sacramental tradition he recapitulates and the wider Christian metaphysical contours he adheres to. This hypothesis would need to be supported by the assumption that, whoever the Areopagite was, he had baptized himself in the liturgical reality of a 'living spring' that offers 'living water' and grants eternity. This is a reality immutable until today, as both the Corpus Areopagiticum and the Christian Orthodox liturgical tradition confirm.
>
> In my paper I shall offer preliminary evidence on why one should not make the following mistakes in interpreting *theurgy* (θεουργία) in Dionysius' thought. Namely: a) to identify Dionysian *theurgy* with the long Neoplatonic, and Hellenic, broadly speaking, theurgical tradition and practice, b) to consider theurgy a human activity, even if performed by men who have been purified according to the appropriate for that matter Neoplatonic rites, c) to take theurgy according to the Areopagite as another 'special branch of magic,' to use the words of Eric Dodds, and d) to confuse *theurgy* with *hierurgy* (ἱερουργία).
>
> I shall argue that, throughout the Corpus Dionysiacum, theurgy is a term exclusively used by the author to refer either to the works of Christ in His earthly historical presence, or to the whole divine providential, creative, sustaining and divinizing activity and work of God. Consequently, for Dionysius a theurgist could not be anyone else but Christ himself. It is in this regard that I shall argue against Gregory Shaw's view that Dionysian theurgy is just an example of Iamblichus' theurgical account. Part of my criticism develops on the fundamental Dionysian distinction between *theurgy* and *hierurgy*.

Incidentally, if the Dionysian corpus truly was written by the 1st-century convert of St. Paul, as the texts claim and as a recent book argues, then it would be incorrect to refer to St. Dionysius as a Neoplatonist and to conflate his use of the word "theurgy" with practices that developed later.

[31] Responding to Michael Warren Davis's critique, Morello clarifies that "despite the connaturality that exists between nature and grace, the fallen condition of the former means that all expressions of man's natural religiosity that have *not* been assumed into the life of grace, and both healed and transformed by it, will inevitably be to some degree demonic." Still, he sees theurgy as something that needs to be baptized and purified, rather than as an inherently evil practice to be rejected.

Defending against Davis, Morello points out that in an appendix to his book he criticized Rod Dreher for using language that suggests the difference between pagan and Christian "magic" is merely one of degree rather than kind, and for suggesting that ancient Christians "shared with the pagans this sacramental vision: a material world saturated with spiritual meaning and power" (174). But that does not change the fact that Morello says essentially the same thing in the main body of his book: "out of the Hermetic traditions…emerged a metaphysical language expressive of the vertical vision of the cosmos common to all religious traditions" (58-59); "a vision of the world that acknowledges it as God's Icon…was the shared vision of premodernity, and more generally the shared metaphysical vernacular of all broadly religious ontologies" (71).

commune with the divine spirits and call God down into the inner chamber as they chant the sacred words and perform the sacred rituals." Then Morello immediately draws a continuity between pagan and Christian "theurgy": "Like the theurgic practitioners of the Mediterranean, many early Christians, following their liturgies, would practise incubation" (38-39). Incubation was the practice of sleeping in a temple in hope of being visited by the god in one's dream or receiving miraculous healing; this originally pagan practice was adopted by some Byzantine Christians in the 5th-7th centuries, though not without controversy.[32] (One would not want to argue that burying a St. Joseph statue upside-down in one's yard is a sound Christian practice just because many people have done so.) Nonetheless, as Morello rightly insists, a Christian shrine is indeed a holy place, so while seeking an extraordinary vision would be unwise, there would be nothing wrong with sleeping in a holy place and praying for some grace or healing.

However, Morello then references books on incubation written by the 15th-century abbot Johannes Trithemius (39), a key figure in the development of modern occultism (and the inspiration for the legend of Faust). Morello cites the translation of these works by Frater Acher, a modern practitioner and theorist of "Western Ritual Magic."[33] Consulting these texts on what Morello praises as "Trithemius's practical angelology of incubatory spellcasting" (118), one finds rituals to get one's personal angel to appear visibly or to reveal hidden knowledge in dreams, and techniques to discover the true name of one's angel, which will enable one to gain power and knowledge.

Though these appear under the heading of "white magic" because the rituals mostly take the form of prayers begging God for an angelic apparition, they are all the more insidious for lending a Christian appearance to divination and spirit-summoning. Wise Catholics of any era would abhor "incubatory spellcasting" not because they subscribe to a "modern, rationalistic Christianity" (39), but precisely because they believe that evil spirits are real and easily deceive those who, in their conceit, thirst for extraordinary experiences and revelations—as the Church's entire mystical tradition warns. Morello's "Christian theurgy" turns out to be not just the Mass by

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[32] Fritz Graf, "Dangerous Dreaming: The Christian Transformation of Dream Incubation," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, Volume 15, Issue 1.

[33] Publisher's description: "*Black Abbot – White Magic: Johannes Trithemius and the Angelic Mind* is the second volume of Frater Acher's Holy Daimon cycle, and focusses on the magical legacy of Johannes Trithemius. The book includes the first full English translations of two angelic grimoires, reveals the construction of the talismanic Tablet of Truth, the compounding of a love philtre, the creation of the exorcistic powder of Pelagius and the purificatory counter-magic of the witch's bath. Through Acher's careful analysis of these texts, the reader is guided towards a mystical and historically attested method of practicing angelic magic. The black abbot should be considered as the central figure in the evolution of the Western esoteric tradition. Trithemius was the teacher of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, a magical role model to John Dee and Paracelsus, and the inspiration behind many of the legends now attributed to Dr Faust. New material sheds light on Trithemius' own magical practice and his formulation of a theologia magica, which relies on cultivating a relationship with the personal angel. … Acher then examines two texts attributed to Trithemius, which evidence the blending of high and folk magic in practice, connecting the celestial intelligences leveraged in Pelagius' writings with the chthonic virtues of plant and animal based concoctions."

another name, but spirit-evoking practices that are superstitious, dangerous, and at best almost guaranteed to produce spiritual delusion.[34]

Morello cites as inspirations two figures who likewise made the distinction Augustine had condemned, between bad necromancy and good theurgy: the above-mentioned Renaissance thinkers, Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. Among Pico's theses condemned by Pope Innocent VIII were "not a few propositions which, under a certain disguise of natural philosophy, strive to lend respectability to certain arts that are hostile to the Catholic Faith and injurious to the human race—arts most sharply condemned by their own canons and by the doctrines of the Catholic doctors."[35] This strategy of concealing (or at least rationalizing) forbidden arts under the name of "natural philosophy" or "natural magic" was also used by Ficino, whom Morello praises as a Hermetic magician (61). This was not the "natural magic" (science) of St. Albert, for it involved the invocation of celestial souls and spirits, which Ficino insisted was *not* the same as demonic magic—essentially we are expected to trust his judgment about the good nature of these unknown beings.[36] One thinks of Blessed (soon to be Saint) Bartolo Longo, the former spiritualist who before his conversion was convinced he was receiving wisdom from an angel of light.

Returning to the philosophical content of Neoplatonism, there is something strange about the way Morello characterizes the Neoplatonic worldview as he makes it his solution for the Church's ailments. In his first chapter, Morello takes issue with St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, quoting the following: "When a…meditation is about something abstract…the

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[34] Just after referring to Trimethius's works on incubation, Morello seems to imply the support of Bishop Erik Varden of Trondheim, Norway, for these kinds of practices by citing a personal conversation in which he asked the bishop "what he thought of the practice of Christian incubation. [Bishop Varden] replied, 'That is indeed the purpose of the monastery guesthouse, for any seasoned guestmaster can tell you what a powerful change people can undergo merely by sleeping in a place sanctified by the Holy Mass and the chanting of the Psalms'" (39). Seeking clarification, Thomas Mirus emailed Bishop Varden, asking "Am I right in assuming that you had no notion that [Morello] was referring to any such practices [as those of Trithemius], and would consider them something quite other than what you were describing?" Bishop Varden responded, "Your assumption is correct. Sebastian did mention in general terms the sort of reading he was pursuing; but my remark simply concerned the benefit of being in a place sanctified by prayer, the impact of which can be felt *even* in sleep. I doubt I will have said that the 'purpose' of a monastic guesthouse is to get people to sleep in it! The purpose of the guesthouse is to provide a place in which any comer can be received, as the Rule [of St. Benedict] lays down, 'as Christ himself.'"

[35] *The WM Review*, "Pope Innocent VIII's condemnation of Pico della Mirandola's book of 900 propositions."

[36] One of the Hermetic-inspired practices discussed in Ficino's book *De vita coelitus comparanda* is "a section on statue animation, that is, the making of 'living gods through human intervention in the cosmos.'" See Julia Stimac, "Marsilio Ficino, Astrology, and Renaissance Magic": "Making claims for 'natural' magic as opposed to demonic magic was an effort to get around such possible dangers. Yet despite Ficino's claims to avoiding demons, his theurgy clearly does rely on them, and he therefore had to rationalize their use." Stimac cites Paola Zambelli, a scholar of Renaissance magic: "Ficino and his followers admitted the existence of spiritual beings (demons, angels and devils, anthropomorphic movers of astral bodies etc.) to whom it was possible to address prayers, hymns or innocent spells, thus making their influence beneficial….The magic which Ficino defined as natural promised to make men capable of working many wonders, but it claimed to exclude the invocation of demons."

composition will be…to consider my soul as imprisoned in this corruptible body." Morello comments: "Ignatius repeatedly asks the retreatant to reflect upon himself, analyse himself, enter into himself. A recurrent motif [in Ignatius]…is this notion of the cloistered 'self' occupied with interior interaction with the cloistered 'self'" (17-18). In another of the several sloppy and unsubstantiated intellectual genealogies thrown out in the book, Morello suggests that this aspect of St. Ignatius's spirituality influenced the thought of Descartes, contributing to "Cartesian dualism" and its disenchanted, despiritualized view of material things which characterizes modernity and modern Catholicism—suggesting a philosophical line from St. Ignatius to modern Jesuit heretics.[37] This "Cartesian dualism" or rationalism is the chief philosophical adversary of Morello's book, which he hopes will be expelled from the Church by a Hermetic and Neoplatonic revival.

By contrast, Neoplatonism is spoken of throughout Morello's book as providing the basis for a mystical appreciation of the external world, a "matter-positive" philosophy, so to speak. This will be strange to anyone who has read Plotinus, for whom matter as such was evil and the source of evil. Furthermore, Plotinus's advice for getting in touch with God is to "just shut your eyes" (Ennead 1.6.8). Like Ignatius, he speaks of being "weighed down by the body" and of the necessity of turning inward, so as to "hold through our own centre to the centre of all the centres" (Ennead 6.9.8). Similarly:

> He that has the strength, let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy. When he perceives those shapes of grace that show in body, let him not pursue: he must know them for copies, vestiges, shadows, and hasten away towards That they tell of. For if anyone follow what is like a beautiful shape playing over water—is there not a myth telling in symbol of such a dupe, how he sank into the depths of the current and was swept away to nothingness? So too, one that is held by material beauty and will not break free shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the

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[37] Morello 15, 17-18, 21, 23. One can resurrect the late-19th and early-20th century debates between Benedictines and Jesuits over spiritual and liturgical matters. But, one should do so in the light of day and on the basis of theological principles, not as part of a hasty exercise of showing how it is that "philosophy's content is principally *post hoc* and retrospective," with its content being "normally explicable by reference to prior historical events or sequences" (20). Morello takes too seriously the role of ideas to be a complete materialist and historicist in his reductionism. Nonetheless, peppered throughout his text, one senses a reactionary-conservative version of the somewhat hasty dictum of Pope Francis, "Realities are greater than ideas."

Without careful adjudication, such claims can tend toward a kind of unintended pragmatism and anti-conceptualism, as though concepts were mere tools for negotiating reality, which would be not merely profoundly deeper than any finite conceptualization (which none of us deny) but, rather, in some way *heterogenous* with our merely human concepts. Morello is not alone in asserting things about conceptual knowledge and reality in such a way that raises the specter of concerns regarding what was called, in the early 20th century, *modernism*. The particular psychological-philosophical theories of Iain McGilchrist, though full of many interesting and correct observations, nonetheless tend toward a certain anti-conceptualism which is redolent of Bergson and others. One need only listen to the conversation between Morello and McGilchrist to recognize their deep agreement and sympathy, despite whatever differences might separate them. See "Turning the Tide, Dr. Iain McGilchrist," *The European Conservative*.

> Intellective-Being, where, blind even in the Lower-World, he shall have commerce only with shadows, there as here (Plotinus, Ennead 1.6.8).

To be sure, as Morello says, Plotinus did see bodies (thanks to their forms overcoming their matter) as good, and as images of higher realities. But what is odd is for Morello to take issue with St. Ignatius's language about the soul imprisoned in the body (and not the body as such, but the body qua *corruptible*) and the need to turn inward, and then to recommend Neoplatonism as the antidote, seemingly unaware that Plotinus said as much and more along those lines. Indeed, "shut your eyes" seems a far cry from much of Morello's cultural project, such as his mysticism of hunting. Plotinus was brilliant and is well worth studying, but as a Catholic who believed in the Incarnation, St. Ignatius had by default a higher view of material things than any pagan mystic could dream of.[38]

In writing and in podcasts, Morello mentions the works of Frs. Norris Clarke, Louis-Bertrand Geiger, Cornelio Fabro, and John Wippel, as well as Dr. Gregory Doolan, in connection with contemporary appreciation for Neoplatonic influences present within the works of Aquinas.[39] Even where some of the present authors might differ on this or that point found in the aforementioned authors (as well as others who have written in the same vein), we all agree that this renewed appreciation for the Neoplatonic elements in Thomas represents an important clarification regarding the proper way to understand the many layers and material influences that are presupposed for Thomas's own formal positions. Nonetheless, we equally think that the Neoplatonic elements in Aquinas are a far cry from that of the Renaissance Hermeticists whom Morello proposes as guides uniquely situated for our own ecclesial situation. There is much that is in Thomas which is more Christian and more Catholic than what one will find in the humanist tradition, and the Church herself has repeatedly emphasized the preeminence of Thomas, whom we are not wrong to think was better understood by the modern scholastics than by the overly zealous anti-scholastics of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[40]

In the end, the philosophy of the Neoplatonists ought not to be conflated with that of Hermeticism, which Coulombe does in order to make the absurd claim that St. Dionysius and St. Augustine shared a "magical concept of the world." While the two traditions share common roots in pagan ritual practices, they are clearly distinguishable in both philosophy and practice. But neither ought to be taken up uncritically by modern Catholics. As mentioned above, the history

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[38] It is, however, St. Ignatius's notion of obedience which has made him a target for some traditionalists.

[39] Because of the focus that we have chosen for the present article, we will forego treatment of Morello's *The World as God's Icon* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020). However, we are not opposed to his general aims in presenting to the reading public a rather brief summary of some scholars who have worked to increase appreciation for the Neoplatonic elements that are critically important to the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

[40] In point of fact, there is a good argument to be made that the movement of humanism and its focus on sources is deeply connected with the epistemological skepticism that marked classical modernity, for the study of *sources precisely as sources* remains a kind of epistemic refuge even if sure knowledge is deemed to be impossible. Even if this observation perhaps stands in need of nuance, it is quite suggestive and reminds one that "pre-modern" vs. "modern" narratives almost always break down under the pressure of historical facts.

of modern Hermeticism is a sordid one. Among its most prominent modern practitioners are to be found the likes of the Satanist Aleister Crowley, the Theosophist/spiritualist Helena Blavatsky, the "Super-Fascist" anti-Catholic writer Julius Evola, and indeed countless secret organizations and societies that trade in false mysticism as a counterfeit currency to the Faith, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.[41] The true legacy of saints and doctors such as Albert the Great is be found in the flourishing of the *sciences*, material and spiritual, that followed upon their work, and the true unfolding of the beauty of God's creation to the human mind. This is the crucial point that the promoters of "re-enchantment" fail to grasp, that our connection to the Divine Creator is fulfilled, not stunted, by true and experiential knowledge of His works, undertaken through the rational faculties with which He has so wondrously gifted us.

**Language, Scandal, and Dangerous Dabbling**

Defending himself against criticism by Michael Warren Davis, Morello explains that he uses the word "magic" in an analogical sense: "1) to refer to the Neoplatonic world as a *living emanation* of the Creator, an account of the world that's antithetical to the Enlightenment worldview which I oppose, namely that of a dead and mechanical universe; and 2) the active participation by us in the created order so as to offer it to the glory of God, which I argue is futile and even dangerous if not baptised in Christ (given the diabolical character of unredeemed nature)."

The history given above should make clear why magic is not an apt word to describe these realities. It seems to raise more problems than it solves and to muddle more than it clarifies. Likewise with the language of Hermeticism: if *all Hermeticism means* is "a vision of the world that acknowledges it as God's Icon," why not just say that? Why is invoking the fraught and shadowy figure of Hermes Trismegistus necessary to make the point?[42]

Even if one's use of the term could be clarified to have an absolutely orthodox meaning, we believe the fact that the word has *never in the mainstream Catholic tradition* been used in a positive way to describe supernatural or religious realities, is ample reason against beginning to use it that way now.[43] The only positive use of "magic" in the orthodox tradition is the "natural

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[41] In what Morello cites as a "remarkable essay" (74), Charles Coulombe extensively praises the Golden Dawn, concluding: "This is deepest Christian Hermeticism indeed. It is to the honour of the Golden Dawn that the Order both developed an authentic strand of such Hermeticism, and attracted members of the calibre necessary to convey such to a world not without need of it."

[42] And why speak in the Hermetic language of "egregores" (90-91) rather simply than of "collective consciousness" or, in particular, "ideological possession"? The latter retains the rhetorical force Morello desires while avoiding the unnecessary evocation of other, more dubious meanings connected to Hermeticisism and theosophy. Why choose a terminology having a less than savory character, especially from the perspective of traditional Catholic thought and vocabulary?

[43] Both Morello and his publisher, Peter Kwasniewski, repeatedly appeal to C.S. Lewis's language of "deeper magic" in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It seems they must resort to Narnia because they can find no weighty Catholic authority endorsing the use of magic as a positive term to describe what the Church does.

magic" spoken of by St. Albert and William of Auvergne, which referred to what we would now call natural science, *not* spiritual practices, liturgy, or sacramentals. And even this terminology of natural magic would soon be abused by the occult dabblers of the Renaissance.

It is impossible to avoid here the problem of scandal as well as, in the language of classical theological censures, claims that are *male sonans*.[44]. On this point, Morello argues: "Saint Augustine famously argued that the term 'fate' admitted of an orthodox meaning, although he recommended that Christians avoid using it so as not to cause misunderstandings. Perhaps the term 'magic,' like 'fate,' does indeed allow for misunderstanding, but if there is good reason to use it, and if one explains clearly what is meant, as I have at length, the objection falls away — at least among literate and thoughtful people."[45]

But what we have written above should indicate that Morello's attempts at clarity are insufficient—nor has he offered a "good reason to use" the language of magic. Here is St. Thomas Aquinas reiterating St. Augustine's point:

> Since, however, we should not use even names in common with unbelievers, lest use of the same expressions lead us into error, the faithful should not use the word 'fate,' lest they seem to agree with those who subject all things to the force of the stars, having false notions about fate. Hence Augustine says: *If anyone gives the name of fate to God's will or power, let him keep his opinion, but hold his tongue* (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.93.7).

As to Morello's claim that the objection falls away "at least among literate and thoughtful people," there seems to be a kind of spiritual pride in trying to sidestep the problem of scandal by

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Kwasniewski accuses Thomas Mirus of being "the kind of person who would see C.S. Lewis's mention of "deeper magic" and throw the book across the room, as a piece of corrosive pagan literature." To which Mirus responds: I do not object to Lewis's limited use of "deeper magic" in a fantasy setting—until someone starts building an entire worldview out of it.

[44] In mentioning the classical censures, we do not arrogate the authority to level them against Morello in an official manner. Nonetheless, we believe that we are well within our rights to judge that he carelessly uses the terms magic, theurgy, hermeticism, esoteric, and perennialist in ways that are likely to mislead. Concerning the censure "male sonans," see Dylan Schrader, "Theological Notes and Censures," *Encyclopedia of Catholic Theology*: "A statement that is 'bad-sounding' (*male sonans*) is likely to mislead. For instance, the proposition 'in God there are three relative essences' is bad-sounding because it uses the word 'essence' *in an unusual sense. This makes bad-sounding propositions harmful to people's correct understanding of Christian faith*. In this way, bad-sounding propositions subvert theological science, whose purpose is to aid faith. Thus, bad-sounding propositions are an abuse of theology, not only of words" (emphasis added).

And, as regards the formal censure of scandal: "A statement that is 'scandalous' (*scandalosa*) unduly discourages people from the active practice of their faith. This could be by instilling doubt, skepticism, cynicism, despair, or some other quality that dissuades people from exercising religion and piety. For instance, it would be scandalous to belittle the rosary as a devotion for the simple-minded or to disparage the consecrated life or the clerical state" (emphasis added).

[45] Morello goes on: "Davis's argumentation against the word 'magic' is as sophisticated as claiming that anyone using the word 'gnosis' or 'pleroma' must be a Gnostic, or anyone speaking of 'theosis' must be a pantheist, or anyone saying that 'the flesh wars against the spirit' must be a Manichaean." And we add, in regard to Morello: Or that anyone who speaks of the need to turn inward must be a source of Cartesian dualism?

saying “Well, it won’t scandalize the *right* people.” The whole point about the evil of scandal is that it is precisely the *weaker brethren* who are in danger of being scandalized.

But the question of scandal aside, Morello is right to say that one cannot judge a book by its least capable readers. Perhaps if we instead consult those “literate and thoughtful people” who have endorsed it because, as Morello says, “they have understood the book,” we will get a better sense of whether Hermeticism is safe for Catholics.

One thoughtful reader whose endorsement Morello boasts is “psychologist and cognitive scientist John Vervaeke,” with whom Morello has recorded a number of podcasts. Vervaeke is an especially credible expert on Hermeticism since, according to his telling, he speaks with Hermes himself on a regular basis. While engaging in a kind of meditative therapy, this “numinous” presence made himself felt in Vervaeke’s mind, telling him, “I want to have a relationship with you.” Vervaeke muses, “Hermes has been coy about me trying to pin down his ontological status”; he describes the “entities” he encounters during therapy as “neither subjective nor objective,” but rather “transjective.” Nevertheless, he has committed to his relationship with Hermes “the Greek god,” engaging in “ongoing dialogue” “once or twice a week.”[46]

If we are to believe that Hermetic magic merely means the application of a pre-modern, non-rationalistic worldview, it won’t do to point us to the endorsement of someone like Vervaeke (who, however, is ultra-modern in the pseudoscientific language he uses to avoid admitting the spiritual reality of what he is encountering).

But Vervaeke is not a Christian, so perhaps we cannot expect the same level of discernment and caution in his engagement with the Hermetic tradition. Let’s turn instead then to Morello’s friend Roger Buck, a prominent figure among traditionalist Catholics interested in Hermeticism and the thought of Valentin Tomberg. Tomberg was an occultist and former Anthroposophist who, even after his entry into the Catholic Church, retained heretical beliefs such as reincarnation.[47] On the Gnostalgia podcast which Morello co-hosts, he discusses a meeting with Buck in which Tomberg came up:

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[46] See Vervaeke in conversation with Jordan Peterson at 45:17, and clips of Vervaeke talking about Hermes played on Decoding the Gurus.

[47] Tomberg is best known for his book *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*. In that work, he repeatedly affirms reincarnation. In Letter XX he also toys with the idea of apokatastasis, and outright affirms that all sinners will have a final chance to repent at the Last Judgment.

Some of Tomberg’s Catholic admirers, such as Morello, Buck, and Kwasniewski, have acknowledged his theological errors while arguing for his value. Kwasniewski, for instance, says “Tomberg was a remarkable convert whose (relatively few) errors do not detract from the splendor of his insights.” Against a commenter who writes that reincarnation is a sufficiently big error to warrant extreme caution in approaching Tomberg’s writings, Kwasniewski retorts: “That's like saying ‘Denying the Trinity and the Incarnation are pretty big errors, so Aquinas should never have bothered with Averroes, Avicenna, Maimonides, and Proclus.’ Your position is fundamentally anti-intellectual.”

However, there is a fundamental difference between Catholics engaging with non-Catholic philosophers and freely seeking out theological influence from *heretical Catholic authors*. There is basically no precedent for Catholic approval of the latter practice—it is totally *untraditional*. The teaching of the Church from the New Testament on is that heretics are to be avoided (2 John 10-11, Romans 16:17-18, Titus 3:10-11). Unlike some early

> I didn't want to go into it too much, particularly because some of our more normie listeners might get the heebie-jeebies, but it was definitely a case of, in the Newmanian phrase, "heart speaking unto heart." Roger and I spent probably three and a half hours discussing all things Tombergian and esoteric and Hermetic.…I'm hoping today that we're going to talk a little bit about the gods—small "g" gods—and that's very much the way that Roger Buck sees Tomberg. Tomberg said that he would speak to certain people and lead and guide certain people from beyond the grave—that in his divinized condition in the celestial spheres, he would interact with the world, and become something of in the Hellenistic sense a daemon, and guide people here below. And this was very much what Roger Buck insisted had likely been going on with me, for the last few years really. Tomberg has become a major figure in my own theological understanding, in my own understanding of Christian mysticism. … [Buck said that] "Tomberg has been sitting with you in your study the whole time, in a very literal sense he has been one of the gods walking among you and guiding you." So, you know, that was cool.

Now, Morello and Buck would no doubt point out that divinization is Catholic doctrine: "I have said, ye are gods" (Ps. 82:6). They might claim that they were saying, in so many words, that Tomberg is a saint guiding them from heaven… But the problem is that a saint is *not* "a daemon in the Hellenistic sense." And the question remains, what kind of Catholics talk this way? *What is the point?* Is reality insufficiently "enchanted" when you call someone a saint, but properly enchanted when you call him a daemon? Is this not, at best, both scandalous and pretentious?

So when Morello says that his magical language is safe so long as "literate and thoughtful people" are reading it, and we find that the people he considers his ideal readers talk to Hermes and think that a dead ex-occultist has accomplished his prophecy of becoming a daemon to guide future esoteric dabblers from the celestial spheres—well, we will be forgiven for questioning Morello's judgment that he and his friends are sufficiently wise and sober to approach these areas safely. Morello invites his readers to wander after him into what is evidently an intellectual and spiritual minefield, in which he struts about, blissfully unaware that several of his companions have already had their legs blown off.

**Monastics vs. Mendicants?**

Despite his seeming preference for citing Hermeticist authors, Morello is clearly an admirer of Benedictine monasticism and its effect in Christianizing his beloved England. Indeed, there is much to be admired in Morello's argument that Christendom is Benedictine and Christianity monastic at its eschatological core. Granted, this definition of "Christendom" refers,

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Catholic figures who erred in doctrine, Tomberg could not make the excuse that the Church's teaching on these points was not sufficiently clear.

in point of fact, to Western Christendom, for the East—for which Morello has clear affinities and respect—was never Benedictine in the way that the West was. However, he is writing to a primarily Western audience, so it is to be expected that he would speak in terms that evoke the institutional and cultural history of monasticism in the West, a history which is deeply Benedictine, whether Cluniac or Cistercian.[48]

What is much more troubling is the simplified narrative that follows upon this, when Morello's "fall" narrative begins in true force: the coming of the mendicant friars represents the first stumbling steps toward the modern downfall of Christendom. To a degree, this historical jump is not as surprising as it might seem at first. It is quite true to say that the seeds of modernity were sown in the 12th century. In a public forum, the medievalist and Franciscan scholar Dr. Timothy Noone once commented that we are still living in the historical arc of the economic growth of that era. Something similar could be said concerning the forces of urbanization and intellectual developments. Therefore, one can quite readily look to the events of the 12th and 13th century and find their points of connection with the full-blown modernity of the 16th century and thereafter. Morello does not fail to do so. We are told that the friars represent a dramatic change (and, ultimately, perversion) in the very conceptualization of the notion of a "consecrated person" and, moreover, the very notion of the Christian life and message itself.

Merely for the sake of argumentation, we will concede that the coming of the friars marked an epochal event for Western Christendom, for their emergence was met with much tumult. Nonetheless, one should note well the implication that the author draws from this: "the Church was set on a trajectory that largely helped to unravel its mission centuries later" (104). Unrooted men who were "not farmers, artisans, [or] traders" (104), these missionaries deracinated the Christian message, passing from place to place, indeed "rendering the faithful orthodox" but then passing on to the next town, without leaving any institutional roots, as would have been provided by stable monasteries. Thus, we are told: "the definition of the Christian tacitly changed from a 'liturgical person' to a 'person who accepts certain propositions'… The Faith, without anyone noticing, slowly changed from the existential transfiguration of human nature and the ongoing transformation of human culture to a set of formulae requiring assent. In short, the threads of rationalism, which would later deconstruct the Church and her mission, were sewn into her most holy organ, namely the consecrated life of her religious orders.'" (104). Thus, we can blame the rise of the friars for the fact that Pentecostalist preachers are now making inroads into south America: "Why? Because South America was evangelised by friars and clerics who came, preached, and went. Hence, the evangelisation was skin-deep, whereas what the new world needed was an evangelisation that reached the heart, that is, the kind of evangelisation that comes from centuries of monasticism" (109). It is a narrative which seems plausible at first

[48] We will not concern ourselves with the details of the various monastic families in the West, nor with Morello's simplification of monastic history so as to project the non-clerical nature of monasticism upon the Western-medieval implementation of monastic life, which was often quite clericalized. It is to his credit that he includes in an appendix Dr. Kwasniewski's criticisms of the latter point. We will concede what Morello says about these matters as being a salutary reminder of the monastic-eschatological core of the Church.

blush, yet it is made with such sweeping simplicity and accusation that one rightly wonders how much *counter-revolutionary ideology* is motivating Morello to make claims which deserve careful and detailed historiographical treatment. Despite his self-proclaimed penchant for realities over ideas, it seems that ideas motivate his account just as much as the dirty and complex details of human history. One might well fear that the Apostles themselves would seem to be deracinated missionaries. We await the narrative that tells us that the source of modern reductionism and liberalism was, in point of fact, St. Paul. There are enough resources to be gathered from Protestant distortions of his letters to furnish materials for such a tale…

Morello concedes that the rise of the friars was no conspiracy, nor should it lead one to question the holiness of these religious founders. Yet, he hastens to add: "Nonetheless, with these innovations, the Church over time lost something, perhaps its noblest treasure; it lost its sense of the privileged place of monasticism in the establishment of Christian societies" (105). There is a partial but important truth expressed in this claim, at least as a historical fact, in view of the changes to religious life that followed upon the pressures of urbanized modernity and the rise of the friars. But, we are told that something further has happened: the Church herself has now passed "from a consecrated culture to a managerial culture, the consequences of which have not been good to say the least" (ibid.). There is nothing new in modernity, except for retrogression; the narrative is nearly so animated by reactionary agrarianism that one could allow the tale to write itself.

And, what of the papacy amid contemporary ecclesial "managerialism"? Unlike popes of the past—drawn from peasants and nobles—the post-conciliar "later modern" Church would have received its first "middle-class pope": "Pope Paul VI had all the characteristics of a middle-class manager. He was a social climber with a sympathy for *tabula rasa* ways of governing. Just as the bourgeoisie, with their privileging of ideas over realities[49]—and their pathological impulse, rooted in rationalism, to conform the latter to the former—had overseen every modern revolution, so too Pope Paul oversaw an analogous revolution in the Church. He reduced the sacred liturgy from a mystical conduit of grace expressed in a sacred language to a vernacularised, didactic exercise to entertain a new, educated population" (110).

In fact, one will notice here the presence of a repeated theme found throughout Morello's text. He is too honest to deny the importance of the "propositional" content of faith. Nonetheless, throughout the work, one finds the strawman dichotomy that opposes those who would supposedly reduce Christianity to a rationalist exercise in a merely propositionalist "catechetical exercise" devoid of rooting in praxes and those who see it as being "an ongoing, incremental transfiguration of nature by grace" (111). It is disorienting to read a traditionalist author blithely present caricatures of the post-Tridentine Church while passing over those many figures who would never have dreamt of such a deracinated and rationalistic reduction of Christianity to mere rationalist propositions floating in midair. It is true that the terms of Protestantism and rationalist

[49] Using almost the same words as Pope Francis, an ironic fact to observe; see note 37 above.

modernity affected the self-conceptualization of much of Tridentine Catholicism. And it is indeed a temptation of modern Catholicism—besieged upon all sides—to reduce Christianity to the lines of a merely articulated orthodoxy appealing to a kind of safe catechetical formation. (Indeed, it is a temptation that befalls many traditionalists just as much as the supposedly bourgeois managers decried by Morello.) Yet, truth be told, it is a staggering simplification for this *tendency* to be elevated to a monomaniacal hermeneutic for the whole of the Church, ultimately going back to the 13th century.

**Catholic Tradition or Counter-Revolution?**

This brings us to the nub of the whole affair. Morello's book is not a work of *Catholic Tradition* but, rather, a work of *counter-revolution*. He is a student of De Maistre[50] more than of Benedict of Nursia, let alone of the living Church *of all centuries*. One can choose a *modern reactionary* response to *modern revolution*, but the Church is greater than the modern or the pre-modern, she is the home for all eras and all peoples, and none of them represents a golden age, save the era of Christ's presence, to which only the Mother of God belongs.[51] Unfortunately, Morello's counterrevolutionary zeal vitiates the good that could be drawn from a more responsible and measured volume.

Indeed, Morello frequently falls into the very errors he criticizes, above all an intellectualism that, in his words, "privileges ideas over realities." He elides the details of history in favor of his grand diagnostic theories and genealogies. Critiquing the modern approach to religion, he writes: "Inasmuch as we are religious we stand in judgment over religious tradition, selecting from it what we please in a spirit of postmodern self-authorship." But Morello himself stands in judgment over the Catholic tradition when he critiques St. Ignatius and the mendicants, if not for purposes of postmodern self-authorship, then in a quintessentially and quixotically modern quest to recover the pristine and primitive, over against time-honored later developments.

Morello seems to exist in a kind of intellectual-ideological bubble which allows him to make claims such as this: "Catholicism…degenerated into an internet genre—which is almost solely what it appears to be today" (36-37). This astonishing statement could only be remotely true if Morello considers Catholicism to consist solely of traditionalist intellectuals.[52] It discounts the many people who have been sustaining the Church for decades through their fervent prayers,

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[50] Morello wrote his doctoral thesis on de Maistre, and comments in his book: "I also had to undergo initiation into the Hermetic mind of Joseph de Maistre, an intellectual adventure which did not leave me unchanged" (3).

[51] See Charles Journet, *The Church of the Word Incarnate*, vol. 2, trans. Matthew K. Minerd (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2025), 459.

[52] But of course, many Latin Mass attendees would likewise strongly object to Morello's dismissal of their offline parishes and spiritual lives.

good works, and daily Mass attendance—most of them attending a form of the liturgy which for Morello would apparently disqualify them from the category of true Catholicism.[53] It discounts the many non-Western countries where the faith has been growing rapidly in recent decades, and their martyrs being born into eternal life on a monthly basis.

Rather late to the party, Morello suggests that "it is not to ideas that we ought to look for solutions, but to practices and places." As an example of success in this area he cites the annually increasing thousands making the Latin Mass pilgrimage to Chartres (37). We too will celebrate this success, so long as we are permitted to count alongside it the millions of Catholics traveling across the world to Rome to be with Pope Leo XIV for the ongoing Jubilee Year, including over a million young people at the Jubilee of Youth. We must likewise count, in America, the National Eucharistic Congress, local congresses, and a quarter of a million people participating in the Eucharistic Pilgrimage last year.[54]

While pretending to an ancient ethos, Morello is absolutely modern and up-to-date in his lack of filial piety, displayed in the continual sneering at the Church's hierarchy which we mentioned above. A Catholic cannot write a book (much less an article for a non-Catholic audience, as the chapter originally was) describing a then-reigning Pontiff as a "half-educated gangster from the Andes" (114) —however bad one might have thought that Pontiff to have been.

In Morello's dismissal or ignorance of the faith lived by his ordinary co-religionists throughout the world, and in his blanket disavowal of the Church's hierarchy, he shows a marked detachment from the reality of the Catholic Church that actually exists. It is hardly *incarnational* to prefer one's idea of what the Church should be to the real Church to which we owe our love and submission. It is hardly *rooted* and *conservative* to prefer one's narrativized *ideas* over the living *reality* of grace operative in the Church, over which the gates of Hell shall not prevail, even if that reality does not match the clean lines of one's ideal restored Christendom.

Finally, there is a real tragedy in esotericism. We do not fault those who find aspects of modern Western religion sterile and rationalistic. Yet we grieve when even Catholics, having at hand everything they need, do not seek greater simplicity of heart and union with Christ according to the approved mystics of the Church, but instead delve into every kind of esoteric theory and practice under the sun.

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[53] Morello makes the offensive remark that "the use of a quirky setting for the celebration of modernity is a fairly good description of the vast majority of Catholic Masses over the last half-century" (35). However widespread various forms of liturgical abuse are, to state it like this is an untruthful and impious reduction of the Church's worship.

[54] We acknowledge, of course, the need for improvements in Eucharistic discipline and consistent liturgical reverence at the parish level if the Eucharistic Revival is to bear lasting fruit. And none of these events, either Morello's example or ours, will ultimately matter if they do not bear fruit in love of God and neighbor.

In trying to flee so-called rationalism, esoteric Catholics become trapped in another kind of intellectualism far removed from simple faith, hope, and love. You cannot get out of your head by taking your head-knowledge and making it ambiguous and esoteric. It remains head-knowledge, however decked out in the ear-tickling language of Hermes and Tomberg dwelling in the celestial spheres—Christ is not found in these shallows that appear as heights. He, who alone is Eternal Wisdom, is found in the depths of Mary's ocean, which only humility and love may access.

For our part, we choose the path that the Church has chosen: living engagement with reality and not a thinly veiled romanticism and counter-revolutionary spirit. Such a choice does not commit us to the naïve acceptance of the "kneeling before modernity" so aptly decried by Maritain and others in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Nonetheless, it does commit us to live *organically and rooted* alongside our fellow Catholics, whose status as wheat or weed even the angels do not know.

Dr. Morello calls upon Catholics to recover a love for their own tradition "as a gift providentially bestowed down the centuries." Only in this way will the Church be able "to respond to the dual crisis of loss of meaning and loss of authority" (65).[55] The present authors could not be in greater agreement with the general sentiment of such lines, save one important point: such recovery does not happen upon a path of esoteric and reactionary reestablishment. It is done by way of humbly living amid the life of the *hierarchical* Church, which *pace* the assertions of the author, is not a wasteland of heterodox modernity, even if it is still greatly destabilized by the loss of Catholic identity which has beset the Church for these past decades. What Catholic does not know of good initiatives in the Church, whether initiatives of religious, clerics, or lay? Those who have been Catholics for decades can attest to the fact that the Church of today is infinitely improved over the Church of the 1980s and 1990s (let alone that of the 60s and 70s). The Catholic imagination of today cannot be unraveled the way that it was amid the worldwide upheaval of the 60s and the 70s. Granted, there is much work to be done. Nonetheless, there are many things that cannot be "unseen" and "unsaid." The amount of ecclesial healing that has happened, with acceleration these past twenty years—despite headwinds—is quite heartening. However, the work to be done will not be an esoteric exercise of laboring against modern rationalism for the instauration of a supposed pre-modern Hermetic Benedictinism. Rather, it will be the much messier work of laboring alongside all of one's fellow Catholics, amid the frightful but exhilarating storms of fallen reality into which the light of grace

[55] And yet on Morello's account, it would seem that Providence has suffered greatly for seven hundred years, during which the handing on of tradition was ground almost to a complete halt by the unstoppable force that is modernity, in comparison with which God has found Himself to be impotent, being forced to allow His Church to retreat more and more from her true institutional form.

ceaselessly dawns. This—and not a dubious, reactionary, and sectarian Hermeticism—should be the animating spirit for Catholic courage and witness today.[56]

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[56] The following is a continuation of note 2 above, moved here due to its length. A telling line can be drawn from the letters contained in *In Quest of Catholicity: Malachi Martin Responds to Wolfgang Smith*, ed. Wolfgang Smith (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016). For full context see ch. 7. Here are some points of interest voiced in a letter from Martin to Smith:

> The only reason we humans (believers) can address God is, as you say, through Christ and in Christ, because He is the perfect anthropomorph through whom and in whom we can know, praise and adore the bodiless Father and the Spirit. As you point out, only the Son could become incarnate, could be an anthropomorph, because the Father cannot be generated (His "Personhood" is to generate), nor can the Holy Spirit become incarnate (His "Personhood" is to proceed as Love of the Father and Son). Only the relational consideration saves Christian believers from the cruel trap of a misapplied logic: the Trinity is kaput without the relational.
>
> This, I personally think, is why the humanity (sensu pleno) of Christ—his perfect anthropomorph identity—is the key. The unbeliever trips over this claim. When Aldous Huxley was dealing with the ascetic excesses encouraged by Père Josephe (in Huxley's *Grey Eminence*), he had to blame the anthropomorphic identity of the "historical Jesus" for all these excesses, and go on to pontificate that this Christic anthropomorphism was what spoiled the divineness of Christianity in general and of Père Josephe with his Calvarian Nuns in particular. Just a century before Père Josephe and his bloody master, Cardinal Richelieu, John of the Cross carefully delineated the path to mystical union with God (Father, Son and Holy Ghost) through the anthropomorph Jesus. But Huxley could not in any way understand the Darkness of ascending Mount Carmel. For me, the fatherhood of the Father is a relational thing, as is the identity of the Holy Spirit, as finally is my sonship under God. No doubt in my mind, we should inquire more into Boehme's thought and perception.
>
> Your distinction of intrinsic and extrinsic heresies is admirable (and totally acceptable to this man). Unfortunately, Vatican II was, as you say, an exoterism run wild. But it may serve (at a later date) to facilitate the sense of the esoteric. In all this, Wolfgang, my overall judgment on our present forms of Christianity (those that matter: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox) is that as visible structures they are on their way out.

One might say to Martin that, rather than Jacob Boehme, perhaps it would be better to add to Richelieu and St. John of the Cross the names of Bl. Columba Marmion, Bishop Charles Louis Gay, or Bérulle and the French "School" in defense of a spirituality of Christ's mediation. (Lest the reader think that these words are being written by a closed-minded bigot, these citations are being penned by an author who has drawn spiritual benefit from the Catholic mystic Johann Scheffler, also known as Angelus Silesius, who was influenced by Boehme. Yet the author prefers to take his primary spiritual stand within authors whose orthodoxy remains more solidly founded. Why turn to Boehme rather than Symeon the New Theologian, Gertrude, Ruysbroeck, Suso, or Tauler? One could also add Gregory Palamas, who is recognized as a Saint in several Byzantine Catholic churches. Why turn to Boehme or—as Smith will do, to Hindu mystics—if not to tickle the ears by doctrinal novelties? One may choose to read mystics from outside the fold of the Church. But one should never place them—or seem to place them—on the same level as Catholic mystics.)

However, more importantly to the point concerning Smith, consider now his words in response to Martin, which go much further down the road of esotericizing the Church, admittedly attempting to retain a veneer of orthodoxy (ibid. ch. 8):

> Finally, as you can well imagine, I was very much struck by your suggestion that the "visible forms" of Christianity—be they Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox—may in fact be "on their way out." I do not pretend to understand with any degree of accuracy how you envisage this ongoing decline, a perception based doubtless upon a wealth of experience and observation in many pertinent domains, and on various levels. I can see that we are witnessing the accelerating corruption of Christian institutions, and above all,

> the Catholic Church: it is as if the animating spirit—which is ultimately the Holy Ghost—had withdrawn from its ecclesial forms, to be eventually replaced (as Our Lady had predicted at La Salette) by the foul breath of Antichrist himself. One is forced to surmise, of course, that the papacy, the episcopate, and the priesthood will remain, howbeit it in an outwardly diminished form. Conceivably the Church of the third millennium will, in certain respects, resemble the early Church, even that of the catacombs; and perhaps what will eventually unify Christians will not be primarily the explicated tenets of a dogmatic theology, but something more inward, more mystical, which in a way contains the dogmatic formulations of the past while yet transcending them. It will be a Church, I like to think, that is able to appreciate and honor the likes of a Ramakrishna or a Ramana Maharshi—not to speak of Christian mystics such as our Jacob Boehme!—without compromising its own dogmatic stance or generating the least confusion among the faithful. A Church, in other words, that is in a way inclusive of all truth, in keeping with the venerable dictum: "All truth, by whomsoever it is spoken, is spoken by the Holy Ghost." And finally I ask myself: could anything less than this be truly Catholic, fully and authentically *katholikos*?

The authors of the present article immensely desire that the mystical life have primacy in the Church, for all the faithful are called, by baptism, to the mystical life. Yet, when one asks, "Could anything less than this be truly Catholic, fully and authentically *katholikos*?", we can only reply: Yes; the Church of all ages is *truly, fully,* and *authentically* Catholic, no matter what might be the faults or limitations of her members. The text in question is a letter, so we will grant room for a certain grandiosity and the exploration of ideas between interlocutors. However, once rendered public, one must take care to note the dangers of apocalyptic language, especially when one shows a quite unique interest in many things that lie on the fringes of orthodoxy. We also note that Smith's claim that the Holy Spirit has withdrawn from the Church closely resembles Morello's claim that the Church has lost its authority.

(As for Smith's reference to La Salette, the prediction of Rome's apostasy is not part of the original authentic apparition of Our Lady, but was written by one of the seers decades later, in a document which also contained a number of false prophecies about the Antichrist emerging in the 19th century; this document was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books.)

As a perennialist, Smith believed not only that the world's various religions contained certain aspects of truth discoverable by natural reason, but that God actually gave revelations to each of the ancient religions. In order to rehabilitate heretics like Nestorius and Jacob Boehme, he made a false distinction between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" heresies: "an intrinsic heresy contradicts not only a dogmatic teaching of the Church, but truth itself," while extrinsic heresies "contradict the 'letter,' so to speak, of this or that dogmatic affirmation, but are nonetheless expressive of a theological truth" (ibid., ch. 7). In fact, other things are said in this same chapter, strikingly calling to mind claims of dogmatic relativism which are redolent of claims that have been repeatedly condemned by the Church. A far more mature—and, dare we say, Catholic—presentation of many of these themes can be found in the little volume by Charles Journet, *The Dark Knowledge of God*, trans. James F. Anderson (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2020).

A solid approach to such questions is possible and, in point of fact, took place at great length among even French scholastics. For a summary of this discussion up to 1933, see Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, "The Grace of Christ and the Mystics Outside the Church," in *Our Savior and His Love for Us*, trans. A. Bouchard (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1951), 355–384. Garrigou-Lagrange, broadly accepting the positions of Maritain, recognizes the possibility of such supernatural mystical experience, though subject to significant limitations. For further discussions in this same line, see Charles Journet, "Critères en Mystique comparé," *Nova et vetera* 34, no. 1 (1959): 49–72; idem., "Quelques points d'histoire des religions," *Nova et vetera* 37, no. 2 (1962): 133–152; idem., *The Dark Knowledge of God*, 97–98 and 114n60–63.

Such experience would not be, however, the same as public revelation. As for the language of extrinsic and intrinsic heresy, we remain justified in thinking that a much tighter vocabulary must be used for articulating the conditions of implicit faith had by those who have received grace with a deficient proposal of the objects of faith. Granted, this is a very difficult topic epistemologically speaking. For a brief discussion of this point, see Matthew Minerd, "Implicit Faith: A Primer" on *To Be a Thomist*. For a lengthy discussion of the issues surrounding this topic, see Charles Journet, *The Church of the Word Incarnate*, vol. 3, trans. Dominick Spiekermann, ed. Matthew K. Minerd (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2025), ch. 6, sect. 2, pt. 2 (From Ignorance of the Faith to the Dilemma: Faith or Unbelief).