
If, according to the greatest Roman historian, Tacitus, facts should be narrated *sine ira et studio*, that is, without bias or praise, a quite puzzling task confronts any reader setting out to review this book. On the positive side, Peste’s inquiry can be applauded for its clear exposition, precise information, and convincing conclusions. Nonetheless, the present reviewer cannot help expressing some serious reservations regarding the question of what it contributes to current research.

The book has its origins in a doctoral thesis defended at Göteborg University, and still maintains the broad outline of a dissertation, especially in the introductory section (chapters one and two). Here the author deals with the old question of the controversial relationship between Hermetism and Gnosticism, outlining the common features of these two theosophical-spiritual streams of late Hellenism and the Imperial age. Furthermore, chapter three and four contain a detailed description of the contents of the *Poimandres* (*CH* I) and *On Rebirth* (*CH* XIII), with long and extensive quotations. Such a paraphrastic summary can help recall the essential themes developed in these two treatises, but is essentially superfluous or might have been substantially reduced. Likewise, the section devoted to the “religious context of late antiquity”, to the “sources”, and to “modern research” (pp. 14–31) hardly contains anything new and could therefore have been deleted from the final version of the book. At the same time, Peste offers a synthetic presentation of some distinctive patterns of Gnosticism, in its various ramifications, in order to outline differences and similarities with the Hermetic system as presented in the *Poimandres* (chapter two). This may function only as an *aide-mémoire* for those not well-acquainted with the mythical cycle of esoteric doctrines such as these; it is not clear, however, what it does to advance our knowledge.

The main focus of the book, developed in the following chapters, is a comparison between *CH* I and XIII, considered as a kind of unitary group, and parallel themes which recur in Gnosticism and especially in Sethianism. The thesis of a connection (due, of course, to similarities in contents and motifs) between *CH* I and XIII is neither new nor original, and Peste indeed honestly points out his debts to previous scholars and presents the different, sometimes contrasting, opinions that currently exist about the exegesis of these treatises. His main focus here is on their soteriological aspects (chapter five).
following chapter he considers the treatises into their broader context, namely Egyptian culture during the Hellenistic and Roman Age (chapter six). Peste aims at reconstructing the socio-cultural milieu of the hypothetical Hermetic “lodges” (as provocatively defined by Gilles Quispel).

According to Peste, it is highly probable that the texts in question were read and meditated upon as “scriptures” by groups of like-minded people gathering around influential teachers. He does not discuss the question of whether or not Hermetism can be considered as a “religion”, but he (rightly) admits that Hermetists practiced rituals, like prayer, hymns, songs and forms of adoration or contemplation. This interpretation is obviously deeply influenced by Fowden’s renowned Egyptian Hermes and is worthy of serious consideration. In particular, the section devoted to a relationship between the alchemical treatise On the Omega ascribed to Zosimos of Panopolis, and Gnostic or Hermetic texts is the most original part of the book. However, Peste should have paid more attention to the recent, excellent edition of this text by M. Mertens, which is accompanied by an extensive introduction and an abundant critical apparatus. I must assume that Peste is not at ease with French; otherwise it is hard to explain the rather uneven use of secondary literature written in that language. Apart from Mertens, it is astonishing how rarely authorities in Hermetic and Gnostic studies like Festugière, Mahé or Tardieu are cited.

This last point leads me to a more general remark concerning the bibliography, where secondary literature written in other languages than English or, to a lesser extent, German, is only sporadically mentioned. Whereas French authors, as already noted, seem to be mentioned only for the sake of formality, Italian contributions, unless written or translated into English (e.g. Bianchi and Filoramo), are passed over in complete silence. One could mention here, at the least, Casadio, Sfameni Gasparro, Camplani and Moreschini. Regrettably, due to the increasingly predominant role of English in the field of both the history of classics and religions, Italian seems to be gradually arriving at a condition similar to that of Greek during the Middle Ages: non legitur. Moreover, Peste seems to rely mainly on standard books, handbooks or reference volumes, usually published in the last twenty years (e.g., Rudolph or Filoramo on Gnosticism, or Copenhaver and Fowden on Hermetism), thereby ignoring or disregarding many previous contributions.

Each of the themes touched on in this study (god as androgynous, the fallen female principles, the mediator, the heavenly ascent, anthropology and soteriology, astrological and/or alchemical connections, paradosis, spiritual sacrifice) has a long scholarly tradition and consequently much secondary literature has been produced on it. One could think, for example, of Dodd or