The present volume is a shortened modification of the author’s doctoral thesis at the École pratique des hautes études, entitled “Pratiques rituelles et pratiques hermétiques” (2005). In my view, this shortening represents a significant sharpening of the work. In the main, the author follows the path laid down by Garth Fowden and Jean-Pierre Mahé, the two pylons of modern Hermetic studies. Like these scholars, and contra the earlier consensus championed by A. J. Festugière, Van den Kerchove accepts the existence of a Hermetic community and sees the Hermetic treatises as substantially affiliated with native Egyptian traditions, though naturally heavily influenced by Greek philosophy.

The book consists of seven chapters, divided into three parts. Each chapter is prefaced with an introductory statement, which makes the argumentation easy to follow. The first part (pp. 23–180) treats the stages of the “Way of Hermes” as a ritual practice and discusses the mythic chain of the tradition (chap. 1), the didactic practices as they are portrayed in the treatises (chap. 2), and the purported secrecy of the tradition (chap. 3). With Pierre Hadot’s famous notion of philosophy as “spiritual exercises” as a point of departure, we are shown that the Hermetic teaching is no mere doctrinal exposition; it is meant to transform the disciple. This was already presumed in Fowden and Mahé’s emphasis on the teaching as a spiritual way, with stages, but Van den Kerchove goes into much greater detail on the master-pupil dynamic that is portrayed in the texts. Parallels between the didactic practices of the Egyptian House of Life and the Way of Hermes are also pointed out, but it is never clear how we are meant to interpret these parallels. Were the Hermetic authors well-informed Greeks, like Plutarch, or were the Egyptian priests somehow involved in the writing of the treatises or in the ritual practices?

The second part concerns the modes of communication with the divine, and treats the divine images (chap. 4), as well as sacrifices, prayers, the ritual embrace, and cultic meal (chap. 5). These practices are too often ignored in Hermetic studies, and so their in-depth treatment here is especially valuable. The Hermetic passages about the cult of images (CH XVII and the Asclepius) are placed in the context of the ongoing debate on the divinity of such man-made objects. Van den Kerchove rightly points out that the account of the creation of statues in Asclepius 37–38 accurately represents the Egyptian ritual of the Opening of the Mouth. However, she also claims that the passage relies on Greek traditions (p. 213), though the evidence adduced is posterior to the
Asclepius: Iamblichus’ response to Porphyry, commonly known as De mysteriis, cannot have been written much earlier than 300 C.E., by which time the Greek original of the Asclepius was known to Lactantius. Proclus wrote in the fifth century. I find it unlikely that the Asclepius is a response to Porphyry’s Letter to Anebo (p. 221), and Van den Kerchove does not justify her dating of the former text to the second half of the 3rd century (p. 5). The conclusion (pp. 221–222), that the statues of the gods should be believed in as a pious memory but need no longer actively be worshipped, is to my mind not sufficiently argued. The same ambiguity is present in the treatment of sacrifice. At first we are told (correctly in my view): “Ainsi, pour être pieux, tout homme (et tout hermétiste) doit sacrifier régulièrement” (p. 227). However, we are subsequently told that it is only necessary to keep in mind the memory of the venerable past of the traditional sacrifices, but that the rituals need no longer be practiced. This reviewer finds it unlikely that traditional sacrifices and rituals to animate the cult-statues would be defended if the author no longer took part in such practices, or believed that they should be practiced.

The third part moves on to the religio mentis, and examines the attainment of intellect, nous, in the Poimandres (CH I) and the Mixing Bowl (CH IV), treating the latter as a baptismal rite (chap. 6). The last chapter (chap. 7) deals with the intimate knowledge of God (gnosis theou), which, according to Van den Kerchove, is achieved by means of the ritual of rebirth, as reflected in On Rebirth (CH XIII) and The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth (NHC VI, 6). The general movement from Nous towards gnosis theou is in contradistinction to Mahé’s postulated progression gnosis–logos–nous (“La voie d’immortalité,” VC 45 [1991]:351), though this is spelled out more clearly in the author’s doctoral thesis (pp. 949ff.).

In the lengthy treatment of gaining Nous (pp. 279–322), the author goes against the majority of commentators in seeing the immersion in the mixing-bowl full of Nous (CH IV, 4–6) not as a mere metaphor, but as a ritual practice. Of course, the physical impossibility of immersing oneself fully in a mixing-bowl, which is generally too small to hold a human, militates against a baptismal ritual. Van den Kerchove, on the other hand, claims that the rite is not one of immersion, but that drinking wine from the mixing-bowl would metaphorically imply immersing one’s heart in Nous, similar to some interpretations of the Christian Eucharist. There are some problems with this interpretation. First, in the instances in Classical literature where βαπτίζω means to drink, it involves heavy drinking, “to get soaked in wine” (cf. Liddell-Scott), for example, in a Bacchic orgy. Nothing points to Hermetists getting involved in such practices; instead, being drunk is generally disdained. Second, while both Christian and Bacchic rituals have mythic paradigms for the wine — as representing