RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF EUROPE

The Social Function of Secrecy in Iamblichus's De Mysteriis

Nicholas Alexander Marshall

7/15/2011

Supervisor: Anders Klostergaard Petersen

A Thesis Presented to the Humanities Faculty of the University in Aarhus in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Contents

Abstract

During the historical period known as Late Antiquity (ca. 150-750 CE) religious diversity was rampant. The rising influence of Christianity as well as the struggles among various philosophical schools within the context of economic and political crises eventually led to the emergence and sharpening of boundaries among new religious structures. This thesis explores one of these structures, the phenomenon known as theurgy as described in Iamblichus's (ca. 240-325 CE) *De Mysteriis*. "Theurgy," roughly translated to "god-working" marks a practice that the historical record dates to sometime around the first century CE, but that achieves its complete form in the third and fourth centuries. Theurgy is a type of "magic" (though, the ongoing discussion of magic in the ancient world complicates this identification) that Platonist philosophers practiced in the Late Antique world. Whereas previous attempts to understand theurgy have focused on the coherence (or lack thereof) of the tradition itself, I hope to, in the following pages, focus on the social world of the theurgists. Arguing that theurgy was a secretive practice that defined a group based on an inner understanding of its philosophical and practical facets, I hope to demonstrate that secrecy is a useful point of analysis for understanding the social world of Late Antiquity and especially the position of the theurgists.

The project is extremely limited in its scope and method. There is virtually no archaeological or material evidence for the existence of a group known as the theurgists. Thus, this work relies heavily on an interpretation and critique of the discourse that appears within these texts with the aim of highlighting the methods by which the text (in this case, I focus exclusively on the *De Mysteriis*), describes a group and marks it off from other groups in Late Antiquity. The novelty of this is that we are thereby permitted to think of theurgy as the provenance of a specific, distinct religio-philosophical group, and not, as some have mistakenly concluded, as a general practice. This will hopefully allow us, in turn, to more carefully describe the religious practices of groups that heretofore have been unhelpfully lumped together.

The Introduction will discuss many of the basic themes explored throughout the essay. Here I offer a definition of theurgy as well as a brief review of the various modern scholarly perspectives on the subject of theurgy and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity. I argue that theurgy should be understood as a phenomenon within a specific philosophical school in Late Antiquity. I further argue that philosophical schools during this period should better be considered sites of

religious creation and preservation than mere academic enterprises. As such, the study of these institutions from a sociologically informed religious studies perspective will be fruitful.

Chapter 1 provides some historical notes on a background of philosophical schools and teachers in Late Antiquity as a preparation for an analysis of a text that originates from this milieu.

Chapter 2 explores one of the central functions of secrecy, that of advertisement. Here, drawing upon Hugh Urban's theories, I treat the notion of the secret as a form of "symbolic capital." With this conceptual notion in mind, it becomes clear that the possession of a secret permits the secret bearer to project authority over those who do not have access to the secret.

Moving along from the previous chapters that dealt with the function of secrecy against outsiders, Chapter 3 begins to look at the function of the secret within a group. Boundaries in group identification do not end at the outside of a group. It is perhaps even more fruitful to explore how boundaries within a group assign and regulate identity. To this end, I consider the language of hierarchy and specialization in the *De Mysteriis*. Such language closely resembles the language of modern initiatory cults like the Freemasons in which secrecy serves more to "adorn" than to conceal actual hidden truths.

I conclude on the basis of these points that, in the eyes of the tradition described by the *De Mysteriis*, theurgy was not simply a practice available to all, but rather was marketed solely within the boundaries of a group defined by Iamblichus and his followers. Iamblichus emphasized the secrecy of this practice to legitimate his own claims to prestige and authority. I further conclude that the presence of such a technique of secrecy clearly supports previous claims that Iamblichean theurgy was an inherently elitist practice and paradoxically the religio-philosophical system failed as a consequence of its greatest selling point: its elitism. More generally, I conclude that religions of secrecy may be a useful classifiable taxon for religious social practices that seem to share common features with theurgy (e.g. Gnosticism, the creators and users of the Greek Magical Papyri, and certain apocalyptic groups.)

Introduction

In Umberto Eco's masterfully written *Foucault's Pendulum* a group of editors finds themselves trapped by a criminal plot that they themselves unwittingly fashioned. Jaded by the credulity of the various crack-pot occultist writers whom they publish, the editors decide to write their own conspiracy theory by randomly generating lines of textual data about the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, Arthurian legends, Renaissance Hermeticists, alchemists, Kabbalists, Freemasons, the history of Europe, and some filler data (including the marital relations of Mickey Mouse), strung toghether with logical connectives. The result is complete nonsense, but due to the remarkable ability of the human imagination to find connections and the surprisingly interwoven history of these secret societies, "the Plan," as the editors call their intentionally fictitious plot, proves plausible enough to a real group of diabolical magicians, who kidnap one of the protagonists and eventually kill him. All for a secret he never actually had, the content of which was entirely made up.

Foucault's Pendulum is part of a large genre of novels and books that continue to excite the human imagination. Works (not always classified as fiction) on the occult, the Templars, and the ancient lost secrets of various civilizations abound and continue to attract an audience. Given the popularity of such things, it should not be surprising that in the past similar preoccupations with secrets and forbidden knowledge provided the motivation for many of the greatest minds.

Recently, perhaps as a result of the upsurge in fantastical fiction, (one would be remiss to not note in addition to Eco the vast influence of J.K. Rowling and Dan Brown), a community of researchers interested in understanding the history of ideas from a perspective that takes into account the powerful survival of a belief in hidden knowledge has arisen. Young scholars in the fields of theurgy, Gnosticism, and magic are rising up through the ranks and will soon burst out on the scene with a variety of new perspectives on the historical developments of these phenomena.

This small contribution to that ongoing scholarship focuses on the community surrounding the Neoplatonist Iamblichus of Chalcis. Iamblichus shared more in common with the aforementioned Rosicrucians and Hermeticists than with modern academic philosophers. He saw himself as the collator and possessor of an esoteric knowledge, which bore with it the authority of a tradition. To some degree, Iamblichus inherited his secretive practices from what I will call an "ordinary esotericism." The aristocratic ideals and general cultural atmosphere of

conflict in Greek intellectual life precluded a majority of people from learning even the preliminary levels of knowledge (i.e. reading and composition). Iamblichus's school seems to have continued this aristocratic tradition and marked itself as knowledge not accessible to the common people, or, as the *De Mysteriis* occasionally derogatorily names them, "the common herd" *hoi polloi*.[1]

On the other hand, Iamblichus was apparently the inventor of a whole mystagogy (an esoteric system of spiritual attainment), which he "discovers"[2] within the writings of various barbaric peoples. In his *De Mysteriis Aegyptorum*[3] Iamblichus explicitly speaks to the existence of these traditions and then shrouds them in secrecy. This secrecy is aided by the very fact that the ritual procedures Iamblichus describes are foreign to the Greek mind and therefore constitute a natural secrecy in themselves. Thus, it is precisely the impenetrable signs of the ritual act that garner its power.

At the sociological level it is the impenetrability of the secret possessed by the "Master Abamon"[4] that gives him the authority to draw the necessary boundary lines of group identity. The possession of a secret, carefully filtered down to a select view is a powerful tool for group organization. Iamblichus was able---and, I argue, he was forced---to structure his school in such a way as to present that secret without letting everything go. In short, he had to exercise the secret through a process, whereby he presents his knowledge of the secret without actually revealing its meanings in its entirety. To reveal the secret is to destroy its power, to profane the sacred.

---

[1] *DM* 211. (All citations of the *De Mysteriis* or its editorial comments refer to the edition translated by Clarke, Dillon and Hershbell, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 4 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003].

[2] I mean to imply here that Iamblichus's philosophical and ritual system was invented and then projected onto foreigners to enhance the dignity of that system. I realize this view is in opposition to a longstanding scholarly tradition of projecting a xenophobic outlook onto the Greeks, but I detect in philosophical writings an infatuation with the archaic and the foreign, comparable, for example to the two-edged attitude of the British colonials to the "Orient." The foreign object thus becomes not only an object of hostility, but also a mirror for the interests and aims of the subject. Consider Plato's own attribution of a creation myth to an unnamed Egyptian priest, who in the course of the dialogue belittles the Greeks for their childish understanding of history. (*Timaeus* 22b ff.)

[3] This spurious, but often used title was appended by the Renaissance priest and mage, Marsilio Ficino who translated the work into Latin in 1497. The full title of the work is *The Reply of the Master Abammon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo, and the Solutions to the Questions it Contains.*

[4] The Master Abammon, as will be repeated later is the pseudonymous author of the work. Most scholars accept that the author of the the *De Mysteriis* is Iamblichus.

The focus of this thesis is therefore not on the actual content of Iamblichus's secrets, as many previous works have attempted to elicit,[5] but rather on the very process of Iamblichus's secret-keeping. Using modern qualitative social theorists, this essay searches the writings of Iamblichus of Chalcis for evidence of language of secrecy, exclusion, and othering where it can be found. Secrecy and othering can perform a number of functions, but for the sake of this essay I focus on two: 1) Secrets enhance the status of the one who possesses and controls them, and 2) they enhance cohesion of the group, for if one wants to become a member of the group (in this case, the Iamblichean school), one must go through a long and drawn out process that slowly filters this information down to the student.

A brief glance at the table of contents to this paper will show the reader that I spend a great deal of time on the introductory materials to this topic. Despite the inherent interest of this topic, theurgy is still not very widely known, and I beg my reader's indulgence for presenting this extensive background information.

A Brief History of Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism

Until the middle of the nineteenth century and the efforts of Friedrich Schliermacher,[6] scholars believed that the constellation of beliefs later known as "Neoplatonism" comprised the authentic teachings of Plato. Schliermacher began a scholarly project, which has continued to this day, of determining what Plato actually believed or taught, solely through the medium of the dialogues. That this question should even be considered an important distinction could only result from the fascination that the name of Plato continues to evoke. Plato seems to be the first philosopher whose writings we possess in a more or less complete form. This earns him a particularly respectable place in the annals of history. Previous philosophers, commonly known as the pre-Socratics, are known only through fragmentary comments or summaries, preserved in later writers. Plato's writings, however, have survived, and the drive to understand these remarkable texts continues.

However, alongside the drive to understand comes a certain degree of skepticism for the very sources of our understanding. Plato's dialogues, our most obvious access to the thoughts of the wrestler turned philosopher, are sometimes cited as philosophical treatises disguised as

---

[5] E.g. Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
[6] John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Duckworth, 1977), 2.

dramas that have an actual message to convey, and sometimes, they are seen as that most prevalent of philosophical products: literary games.[7]

Even if this second reading is suspended and we accept that Plato did not learn too much of the irony of his teacher, we are left with an author whose ideas remain inconsistent. Scholars who attempt to explain this irregularity, tend to argue that Plato's philosophical system actually went through three distinct, temporal phases. They therefore divide the dialogues into three categories: Early, Middle, and Late,[8] and mark in the progression from the earliest dialogues to the last writings a progression towards a Pythagorized Plato, as described by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*.[9]

This late, Pythagorean Plato seemed to be moving towards a philosophy that encompassed the whole of reality in a systematic understanding. This late Plato also apparently began to adopt an increasingly dogmatic understanding of his own philosophy, shifting from a Socrates who seems to have employed irony solely for the sake of his own irritating whims to a Socrates who was prepared to make definite claims about the nature of reality and humanity's relationship to the cosmos and the various beings inhabiting the universe. Aristotle testifies to this, and later Platonists, as Dillon notes, may actually be deriving some of their complex mmetaphysical principles from unwritten doctrines of Plato. However, one need not only appeal to these unwritten doctrines, for there are hints of Plato's spiritual philosophy (perhaps we could even call this Pythagorean religion) in the dialogues themselves.

Plato's dialogues contain a number of references explicit and implicit to Pythagoras, Pythagoreans, or Pythagorean ideas. *Phaedo* 61d places Socrates in conversation with several Pythagoreans, Simmias and Cebes who are themselves associated with Philolaus a leading representative of Pythagorean thought in Thebes. Simmias and Cebes seem unfamiliar with the view that Socrates presents, that the world is a prison for the soul, but Socrates seems to think they should know this from their affiliation with Philolaus, implying that this view is something

---

[7] For one reading of Plato's dialogues as "play," see Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 59-171.

[8] The commonly used chronological model divides the Platonic dialogues into Early (*Apology, Crito, Charmides, Laches, Lysis, Euthrpho and Ion*), Middle, (*Gorgias, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus, Cratylus, Phaedo, Phaedrus, Symposium, Theatetus, Parmenides*), and Late (*Critias, Laws, Philebus, Sophist, Statesman, Timaeus*). Recently, Blondell has suggested more precise terminology: "aporetic" (earlier dialogues) vs. "constructive" (later). (R. Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge, 2002), cited in Sarah Ahbel-Rappe, *Socrates: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Continuum, 2009), pp. 62, 160 n. 17.

[9] Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 3.

well-known in Pythagorean circles. In the *Symposium* 201c ff., Socrates relates his own tutelage under Diotima, a woman "wise in many things" *hē tauta te sophē hēn kai alla polla* who knew, for example, the proper rituals to perform in order to avert a plague and gave this advice ten years in advance. She tells Socrates surprisingly concrete dogmas about the nature of love: that it is one of a number of daemons, and that these daemons are utilized in the art of priests, which she identifies as "sacrifice, ritual, enchantment, prophecy and sorcery" *kai hē tōn hierōn technē tōn te peri tas thusias kai teletas kai tas epōdas kai tēn manteian pasan kai goētian* (203a).[10] In the *Crito* 54d, Socrates relates that the voices that tell him to live the life of a just philosopher seem to sound in his ears like the flute music that Corybantes seem to hear. Elsewhere, Socrates further elaborates on the ecstasy of Corybantes, whom he likens to metal drawn by the force of a magnet (*Ion* 533d-534), and the models of each of these are used to explain how lyric poets are able to craft such beautiful lyrics, namely through sympathetic inspiration. In 536c he mentions Orpheus in connection with these ideas.[11] In *Gorgias* 492e-493d, Socrates makes reference to specific Pythagorean doctrine and nomenclature, attributing these teachings to "a Sicillian, or perhaps an Italian."[12] In the *Meno* (81a-b), Socrates cites the poet Pindar and several wise priests and priestesses (*hierōn kai hiereiōn*) who say that the "soul is immortal and is never destroyed" *fasi gar tēn psuchēn tou anthrōpou einai athanaton, kai men teleutan hodē apothnēskein kalousi—tote de palin gignesthai apollusthai d'oudepote*, as an important point of evidence for the Platonic doctrine of recollection (*anamneusis*) presented in the dialogue. This view of reincarnation is repeated in *Phaedo* (70c). The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is closely tied to reincarnation, which has often been attributed to Pythagoras. Pythagoras on the basis of the immortality of the soul developed his theory of vegetarianism, for which he is quite famous.

The Pythagorean doctrine becomes for all intents and purposes the chief distinguishing characteristic of Platonism. While Aristotle's school, the Lyceum, for the most part ignored this component of philosophy, Plato's nephew and successor, Speusippus (ca. 407-339 BCE), wrote a

---

[10] As we shall see in the next sections, theurgy and demonology are strongly linked subjects, and it is telling that Diotima would connects these to her understanding of a priestly (hieratic) art.

[11] Iamblichus later connects the personages of Orpheus and Pythagoras by making Orpheus a teacher of Pythagoras (Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica*, 151), but this association between Orpheus and Pythagoras originates much earlier, even so early as the fifth century BCE; see Christopher Riedweg, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cornell University, 2005), 51.

[12] I.e. Pythagoras who established a school in Croton in modern day Sicily.

treatise on Pythagorean tradition.[13] Sometime after Speusippus, at the end of the fourth century BCE, there was a general dying out of interest in Pythagorean ideas, perhaps in response to the Aristotelian critique of these doctrines. This trend did not last long however, as there was a revival of interest in Pythagoras in the third and second centuries BCE. This time, however writers began to publish works under the pseudonym of Pythagoras, incorporating into their treatises anachronistic views of Aristotle in an attempt to demonstrate the continuity of Pythagorean, Platonic, and Aristotelian views.[14]

This Neopythagorean tradition continued on from the second century BCE to our main topic of interest, Iamblichus of Chalcis in the third century CE. Of course, there were variations on the ideas and sometimes (as in the case of Plotinus), the name of Pythagoras was never explicitly mentioned, but there was more or less a continuity of interest in philosophical concepts loosely defined as "Pythagorean." For our purposes it is worth noting this history to see how various Platonic authors invoked Pythagoras as an authority for their teachings.[15] It is this current of Neopythagorean ideas that more or less defines the middle and Neoplatonists and makes their philosophy something different from the philosophy of Plato as presented in the dialogues, though again, even this philosophy seems to show the beginnings of a Pythagorean interest. As we shall see in the next section, theurgy, the main subject of this thesis, arose within this Neopythagorean/Neoplatonist philosophical milieu.

What is theurgy?

Defining theurgy is easier said than done. This difficulty is due in a large part to confusion over whether to treat theurgy as a purely historical concept, rising especially in a late antique philosophical worldview, or as a subject that can be taken from its historical context and used to represent a particular relationship between certain kinds of (often morally valued) miracle-working to other kinds of miracle-working. Theurgy would, on this latter model come to represent a kind of "white magic" universal to all religions that include miracles in their cultural

[13] Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 21. We in fact know of the existence of this treatise through a "partially Iamblichean" work, the *Theology of Arithmetic* (ibid.)
[14] Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 118.
[15] Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, 119.

understandings.[16] Here, I concentrate on presenting the historical evidence of theurgy with which I will critique in the next section to criticize however, on theurgy as a more specific concept, limited to the Greco-Roman world. Theurgy as a historical concept seems to span a considerable period of time from the first century to the late fifth century CE. It is likely that in this historical period of four hundred years or so, the definition of the word changed, making it difficult to find any stability of meaning. However it may be said that for the majority of this period, theurgy describes a human ritual practice often associated with the production of fantastic events such as the animation of statues, production of rain miracles, or ascent of human beings to godhood through apotheiosis.

Most scholarly definitions of theurgy begin with an etymological account of the word. Theurgy (from the Greek *theos* + *ergon*) connects the notions of "God" and "work/action". The chief problem from this seems to be a question of where to place the preposition between these two words. Is theurgy (1) the acting on God through some deed? (2) God's work on the world? (3) a mutual cooperation of God and humanity? Each of these theoretical explications actually finds a manifestation somewhere in the historical record of theurgy. Porphyry, an important Neoplatonic philosopher and Iamblichus's teacher, seems to believe that theurgy fits the first definition, and so resembles the classical definition of magic, i.e. the coercion of divine beings through manipulation of spells and objects. Augustine picks up on this definition and claims that theurgy is nothing more than magic in disguise; magic by another name, designed to deceive the unwary and trick its practitioners into believing their actions are morally acceptable.[17] Augustine's explanation suggests that theurgy was something that had to be hidden. Thus, the deliberate choice of the word "theurgy" was a means of disguising what in actuality was an illegal practice.[18]

---

[16] Anne Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy" *The Classical Quarterly,* New Series 32, no. 1 (1982): 218. To be precise, Sheppard divides theurgy into two categories, a higher and a lower theurgy, and calls the higher theory "white magic."

[17] *City of God* 10.10

[18] Magic had continually been declared illegal since the *lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis* of 81 BCE, which declared among other things that magic and poisoning were illegal. Later commentaries in the late third and fourth centuries CE offered descriptions of some magical practices (nocturnal rites, rites that enchant or bind people, and human sacrifice were declared illegal). The presence of commentaries indicates that the law continued to receive attention and reinterpretation. (Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome Volume 1*: *A History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 233.

Iamblichus, the philosopher whose work is the core examination of this essay, seems to argue for the third definition, though, as we shall see, this is not always clear and he occasionally points to the first and second definitions in his writings.

The historical origins of theurgy are shrouded in myth. The first appearance of a variation of the word seems to have been in a work by Nichomachus of Gerasa (50-150 CE), *The Handbook of Harmony*. In this work, the author explains the origin and use of the letters of the alphabet and especially of the vowels, which have a special relationship to the planets. He claims that the vowels are unpronounceable without consonants, and so the union of vowel and consonant is symbolic of the union between soul and body. Once this union is achieved, the phonetic sounds become "efficacious and perfective[19] of divine things." For our purposes, it is noteworthy that Nichomachus attributes the use of these efficacious phonetic sounds to a particular group, namely the theurgists. "Thus whenever the *theurgoi* are conducting such acts as worship they make invocations symbolically with hissing, clucking, and inarticulate and discordant sounds."[20]

Another commonly cited reference to the origins of theurgy is the tenth century Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Suda*.[21] Like the aforementioned reference in Nichomachus, the *Suda* refers less to the actual practice of theurgy and more to the personalities behind it. Supposedly, the founders of theurgy were a father-son team: Julian the Chaldean (father), and Julian the Theurgist (son). The elder Julian, the Chaldean, is said in the *Suda* to have authored four books on demons but we are not told the title unless it is simply *On Demons*. To the Chaldean's entry is appended a mysterious note "There is a protective amulet for each member of the human body, such as the Chaldaean rituals."[22] Julian is described as a philosopher who wrote about demons. The note on the Chaldean rituals feels out of place; presumably, it is a

---

[19] In Greek the word for "perfective" denotes among other things initation, which is often thought to be a perfection of the candidate into a new status. For a full account of the changing definitions of *teletē* in literary and epigraphic sources, see Schuddeboom, *Greek Religious Terminology—Telete & Orgia* (Brill, 2009).

[20] Nicomachus, *Harmonikon Enchiridion*, in C. von Jan, *Musici Scriptores Graeci* (Leipzig, 1895; reprint, Hildesheim, 1962); Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriguiena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 295; cited by Shaw, *Theurgy*, 184.

[21] The *Suda* was once thought to be a work by an author named Suidas. F. Dölger corrected this with his *Der Titel der Suda* (1936).

[22] "Julianus " Suda Online. Trans. Catherine Roth. iota, 433. http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/iota/433.
This strange note recalls for me the catalogue of archons in the *Secret Book According to John* who rule over isolated parts and organs of the body (15.1-19.10; Meyer [trans.], in Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* [HarperOne, 2007], 119-124).

commentary on the content of the four books? If so, then we begin to get some idea of what theurgy is for the compiler(s) of the *Suda*, some kind of ritual practice that may have involved manipulation of demons by means of amulets.

The next entry reads as follows:

> Julian --- The son of the above-mentioned, who flourished in the reign of Marcus Antoninus.[23] He too wrote *Theurgica*, *Telestica*, and *Oracles in Epic Verse*, and other [works] which happen to be occult [treatises] on this kind of knowledge. On one occasion, when the Romans were suffering from thirst, [the story goes that] this man suddenly created and summoned up dark-coloured clouds and let loose heavy rain along with thunder and lightning bolts one after another. And this [they say that] by some cleverness Julian achieved. But others assert that it was Arnouphis, the Egyptian philosopher, who made this miracle.[24]

For the first time, we have theurgy as a category of knowledge as opposed to the designation of a group. This knowledge is grouped with telestics (rituals) and "Oracles."[25] The grouping is justified because all three of these subcategories all seem to represent a "hidden" (*kruphios*) science, which the author seems to treat as a category in itself (*tēs toiautēs epistēmēs*).

There are problems in relying on the *Suda* as a source. Despite its being a compilation of earlier Greek sources, it must not be forgotten that it was composed in the tenth century in Byzantium at a time and in a place where Christianity was an extremely powerful force. It seems likely under these circumstances that a totalizing Christian ideology aimed at substantizing these traditions into a school of thought,[26] an other that could then be dissected and argued against, could have leaked in. As Janowitz notes, "Our picture of their practices is dependent on [the writers of the *Suda*], many of whom had no great sympathy for the Julians. For these writers, 'theurgy' is indistinguishable from 'magic.'"[27]

Theurgy later becomes strongly associated with Neoplatonism, the body of beliefs surrounding the reinterpretation of Plato and his reconciliation with Stoic and Aristotelian ideas.

---

[23] That is, Marcus Aurelius, whose full name was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus.
[24] "Julianus " Suda Online. Trans. Catherine Roth. iota, 433. http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/iota/434.
[25] This is often taken as a reference to the *Chaldean Oracles*. Athanassiadi affirms the common-held belief that these things were written by Julian the Chaldean. She further proposes an actual location for the writing of the Chaldean Oracles: the Temple of Bel at Apamea in the second century CE. ("Canonizing Iamblichus," in *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, ed. Einar Thomassen,. Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010: 128).
[26] This was a standard strategy for Christians. Consider Justin Martyr's understanding of all philosophies and heresies which did not fit into his understanding of Christianity as part of a universal school of thought, a satanic school that arose in opposition to the Logos of Christ seeded into history.
[27] Janowitz, *Icons of Power* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 7. We shall return in the second part of this introduction to the issue of theurgy's relationship with magic.

However, it is noteworthy that Plotinus (204/5-270), the supposed founder of Neoplatonism,[28] does not mention any variation of the word "theurgy" in any of his writings. Dodds noted this and declared boldly, "the founder of Neoplatonism was neither a magician nor–*pace* modern writers--a theurgist."[29] However, while Plotinus may not have written positively about magic, he does not deny its efficacy, and he even uses the existence of magic as an explanation for certain natural phenomena. In short, Plotinus acknowledges the naturalness of the supposedly supernatural. For him, the fact that magicians can imitate higher forces and coerce these forces into nature is simply a recognition and use of the inherent unity of the universe according to the Stoic doctrine of sympathy.

Plotinus does not seem to personally value the practice of magic, nor does he advocate it to his students. Despite this seeming personal disinterest in the subject of magic, Plotinus's biographer, Porphyry, notes several events and series of events in Plotinus' life, where Plotinus performs actions that seem surprisingly similar to later theurgical practices.[30] Porphyry tells us that Plotinus reached his goal of *henosis,* that is unity with God, on four occasions, and this was performed "in unspeakable actuality and not in potency only."[31]

Moreover, Plotinus was said to have engaged in magical combat with a rival Alexandrian philosopher named Olympius. Olympius, like Plotinus, had been a student of Ammonius, and according to Porphyry, he "had pretentions to philosophy." Jealous of Plotinus's ability to attract and keep pupils, and under the pressures of a clearly antagonistic educational milieu, Olympius used magic in an unspecified way to harm Plotinus through the stars. However, these spells seem to have backfired on Olympius. Reeling from evils even more intense than those he had wished on his rival, Olympius told his companions that he could not injure Plotinus on account of the power of his soul, which "was able to turn back the assaults on him against those who were making the attempt to harm him." Porphyry further comments on this greatness of Plotinus's

---

[28] Neoplatonism was never a tradition in the ancient world. The term is a modern scholarly convention used to classify a group of philosophers, who flourished between the years 200-600, who offered a new development in the reading of Plato, and who saw themselves as part of a more or less continuous tradition.
[29] Dodds, "Theurgy" Appendix II in *Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1956), 285.
[30] For a description and two alternative interpretations of these actions see the sources cited in fn. 42 below.
[31] Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 23.18, trans. Edwards in *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 45.This *henosis* is also the ultimate goal of Iamblichean theurgy. So, the ends of Plotinus and Iamblichus are exactly the same; only the means differ.

soul, saying, ""Plotinus did have something more by birth when compared with others." (*Life of Plotinus* 10)[32]

Porphyry uses this episode in Plotinus's life to expound upon the greatness of Plotinus's soul, which, in the narrative of the *Life* actually became manifested to visible appearance. While Plotinus was in Rome, a certain unnamed Egyptian priest came to Plotinus and offered to conjure his personal daemon.[33] Plotinus agrees to this, and when the two perform an undescribed ceremony, a god appears instead of the expected daemon. Porphyry uses this episode to attest to the greatness of Plotinus. In Plato, people receive their guardian daemons according to the capacity of their souls. Plotinus, because of the greatness of his soul, receives an extremely powerful daemon, i.e. a god.

This latter episode seems to partake of elements of theurgy. Though it is for the most part undetailed, Porphyry makes mention of the presence of live birds[34] at the ceremony. These birds are in some way tied to the continuation of the ritual such that if they are killed, the daemon vanishes.[35] It is easy enough to see how in the scholarly imagination such a ritual with these hints of elaborate connections between objects and animals and supernatural effects could be conflated with magic or even theurgy. However, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty just what kind of ritual this was. Again, aside from these curious episodes, Plotinus does not seem to have much to say on the subject of theurgy.

Porphyry, Plotinus's student, values theurgy. He is in fact the first Platonic philosopher to acknowledge the *Chaldean Oracles*, collecting and collating them. But he has some reservations about theurgy's power. He seems to treat theurgy as though it were a useful preparatory stage[36] to philosophy that nonetheless has great dangers. He writes *The Letter to Anebo*, questioning the apparent contradictions between Platonic philosophy and the theurgic metaphysical world on

---

[32] Edwards 19.

[33] The origin of the personal daemon is Plato's Socrates who declares on several occasions the presence of daimonion, a voice that negatively guides Socrates by telling him when he should not do something. The concept exists in a variety of cultures which have some notion of a spiritual protector or helper. Plotinus wrote an essay on this: "On Our Tutelary Spirit."

[34] Birds are an intriguingly recurrent theme in theurgy/magic. A recent article by Spanadoukis suggests that birds were a common symbol of the flight of the soul to higher realms. See Konstantinos Spanadoukis, "Eusebius *C. Hier*. 6.5 on Man and Fowl: An Instance of Christian-Pagan Dialogue on Theurgic Ritual" *Vigiliae Christainae* 64 (2010): 34-35.

[35] This is, in fact, what happens in the course of the ceremony. Porphyry claims that Plotinus's companion either grows jealous or fearful of the sage's god-daemon, and in his jealousy/fear he strangles the birds that he was holding as part of the ceremony.

[36] R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (Duckworth, 1972), 3.

which theurgy depends. The details of this letter are explored in the next section of this introduction. For now, it is simply necessary to recognize Porphyry's apparent position at the bridge between philosophical speculation and ritual practice.

By far, the most widely recognized figure associated with theurgy is Iamblichus. Iamblichus defended theurgy against the difficult questions of his teacher Porphyry. Iamblichus was able to answer Porphyry's questions sufficiently, and more importantly, he was able to make Iamblichan theurgy the dominant form of Platonism from this point on. His school in Syria became an important training ground for the future Platonic successors of Alexandria and Athens. Some of these future Platonic successors probably overestimated their own ability to convince others of the truth of Iamblichus's message. Having been in the school of Iamblichus for some time, reinforced by the constant praise and admiration of his fellow students, Iamblichus's prized pupil Sopater journeyed to Constantinople to "dominate and convert by his arguments the purpose and headlong policy of Constantine." This policy presumably had something to do with Constantine's support of Christian interests in the empire.[37] According to Eunapius, Constantine's court initially warmly received Sopater and put him to good use as an adviser, but, when the "drunken crowds" ceased to applaud the emperor, Sopater's enemies convinced Constantine that it was somehow his fault. Sopater was beheaded.[38]

Iamblichean Neoplatonism seems to have entered the Athenian cultural scene sometime in the 360s through the teachings of Iamblichus's nephew. For reasons that will be explored in more depth later, theurgy became extraordinarily popular. Most of the evidence of pagan philosophy from the fifth century on is steeped in Iamblichus's ideas.[39] Theurgy begins to come out of the closet as it were, and there is a greater influence on theurgy as a visible display of power, as seen in the case of Nestorius 370. Nestorius, the high priest of the rites at Eleusis, has a dream which he believes tells him that he should dedicate a statue of Achilles to Athena in order to stop an earthquake.[40] This legend survives in Zosimus, a fifth century pagan historian, who

---

[37] There is also evidence that Sopater offered Constantine advice on how to properly consecrate (by theurgic means?) the city of Constantinople; Pierre Chuvin, A *Chronicle of the Last Pagans*, trans. B.A. Archer (Harvard University Press, 1990), 28.
[38] Eunapius*, Lives of the Philosophers*, trans. Wright, LCL (HUP, 2005), 385.
[39] As Edward Watts notes the subject of most third and fourth century sources about the intelligentsia of Athens focused on the great rhetors. In the fifth century, this focus shifts to the Iamblichean philosopher; *City and School* (University of California Press, 2006), 79-80.
[40] Zosimus 4.18 ff.; Watts*, City and School,* p. 90. This Nestorius is generally identified as Plutarch's grandfather.

also notes that the philosopher Syrianus (Proclus's teacher) wrote a hymn to this Nestorius. This suggests that the legend, whatever its verity, survived and propagated a certain image of the pagan holy man.

This shift in authority becomes all the more significant and apparent in the middle of the fourth century when the young prince Julian (331-363 CE) chose Iamblichan Neoplatonism as the most likely contender with Christianity for the hearts and minds of the Hellenists. Julian's decision seems to have been motivated by a desire for an effective religion. He was not at all dissuaded by his teachers', Eusebius and Chrysanthius', warnings that a popular student of Iamblichus and wonder-worker, Maximus of Ephesus resorted to acts of "madness" and magic. Despite an impressive display of pyrotechnics and statue animation in the temple of Hecate, where Maximus caused the statue to light up, smile, and then laugh, Eusebius and Chrysanthius considered Maximus's powers ultimately pointless. Like Plotinus and possibly Porphyry before them, they felt that true purification (the goal of philosophy) could only be achieved through the exercise of reason. According to his Eunapius, when Julian heard of Maximus's wonder-working, he reportedly said, "Keep your books. You have shown me the man I am looking for."[41] Julian seems to have had a great respect for Iamblichean Neoplatonism, though it is difficult to say to what degree he actually held to its tenants, and to what degree he interpolated from other traditions to create a rather personalized religion.

Theurgy continued on through the writings of Proclus and Damascius where it received further variations, but seeing as our current subject focuses on the *De Mysteriis*, a text from the fourth century, it seems reasonable to stop our historical account of theurgy here with Julian.

Scholarly Definitions of Theurgy

A number of books have sought to classify, analyze, and place into historical and philosophical perspective the phenomenon of theurgy in general. The most famous of these is Hans Lewy's *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy* (1978). Lewy argues that theurgy was a predominantly eastern phenomenon (probably based on survivals from Zoroastrian traditions) that found expression through Neoplatonic vocabulary. In his argument, Lewy focuses especially on the presence of solar cult and fire worship. Following Lewy, Dodds emphasized the foreignness and parasitic nature of theurgy. Theurgy was an irrational holdover of especially

[41] Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 435.

eastern practices.[42] Both Lewy and Dodds have received criticism for these views. Naomi Janowitz in her recent work on the semiotics of theurgy, claims that theurgy should more properly be understood as traditional rituals on the basis of their utilization of language associated with the mystery schools and traditional religions of the Greco Roman world (e.g. *mystes* [initiate] and *hiereus* [priest])[43]

Pace Janowitz, I tend towards a particular definition of theurgy. While she argues that the term should not refer to "a specific, often extremely narrow set of rites,"[44] this is not rigorous enough for the purposes of classification. Some scholars, apparently with this mindset, carelessly and unmindfully use Augustine's definition of theurgy. Especially in writings on Judaism, scholars tend to classify Jewish ritual practices as theurgy so that they will not be pejoratively labeled as magic.[45] Like Peter Schäfer, I limit my use of theurgy to the ritual practices specifically mentioned in the writings associated with theurgy, namely the Neoplatonists and the *Chaldean Oracles.* By focusing on one specific text, the *De Mysteriis,* and exploring how Iamblichus distinguishes his practices from others I hope to make this limitation of the definition all the more clear. It is in this textual discourse that we can find how Iamblichus defines theurgy for the purposes of his own group and isolates those practices from others, with whom he might easily be confused.

Defining Magic and Theurgy

At this point, it may be worth a brief digression to discuss various definitions of magic and theurgy. This may seem like backtracking, and it may have been more conventional to deal with the issues of definition before outlining the history, for, after all, how can one explore the history of a subject without a clear notion of what that subject is? However, in spite of the backtracking, I think it is more helpful to present the historical background first, and then question how various scholars have read this evidence in their attempts to define it.

---

[42] Dodds especially notes that the final aim of theurgy, the separation of soul and body, was a "contribution" of a "new religious pattern" that "introduced into European culture a new interpretation of human existence, [which] we call puritanical" (Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational,* 139.)

[43] Janowitz, *Icons* 8.

[44] Janowitz, *Icons,* 18.

[45] E.g. Ph. Alexander, "Response," in *Gershom Scholem's* Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*: 50 Years After*. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism, ed. P. Schäfer and J. Dan, Tübingen 1993, p. 82; cited by Schäfer as an example of misuse of theurgy as a *technicus terminus*, "Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism," in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Brill, 1997), 25 n. 24.

To begin with, it is necessary to approach the question of how scholars can possibly study supernatural phenomena. The common method, and the one employed here is to table all questions of the physical reality of these phenomena. It is not part of the scholarly project to determine whether or not it actually rained on a specific day in response to a theurgic working, or whether the arrival of demons in response to incantations was a likely occurrence. Instead, the objective scholar can only start from the assumption that to ancient people these events were important and possible within the systems of belief established by them. The situation is thus precisely the same as that described in the relationship between a Catholic insider receiving the Eucharist and a non-believing outsider. To the outsider, there is no discernible change in the bread and wine, while the insider believes he or she is receiving an ontologically transmuted substance. The immense gap in distance between these two perspectives, however, does not prevent the outsider from considering all the external factors of the ceremony and asking questions about how the ceremony effects the individual through the manipulation of symbols and gestures.

There are two main theoretical positions for considering the efficacy of magic at this outsider level: the intellectualist approach and the sociological approach. The intellectualist approach understands magic as a function of normal intellectual processes, often those concerned with modeling cause and effect in complex systems, while the sociological approach understands magic as an outward, symbolic manifestation of human relationships. What follows is a brief history of the study of religion. My intent here is to show the development of these two approaches to magic and religion

The study of religion has always run parallel to the study of magic. In fact, it could be said that the history of theoretical approaches in the study of religion has been largely a question of where to (or even if one should) draw the boundary lines between these two topics. Early theorists of religion largely ignored the magical. Early modern approaches were revolutionary for their incorporation of magic as a useful definitional concept, but philosophers applied the term to religious behaviors that seemed somehow primitive to them. The philosopher G.W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), who might be thought of as the first modern philosopher of religion, famously stated that the earliest form of religion was magic. Hegel was interested in comparing all the religious traditions he could to determine whether there were any common features that might indicate a universal religious truth that could then be distilled into a pure form. Having set

himself a quest with these parameters, he came to the conclusion that every religion could be charted on an evolutionary model, ranging from the most primitive religious beliefs (such as were to be found among African tribes and Innuits) and which he classified as "magic" to the most advanced form of religious belief, which was naturally to be found in the Christianity of his native Prussian state.[46]

Hegel's quest for an evolutionary model was taken up by the intellectualist tradition of religious studies/anthropology represented prominently in the British scholars Spencer 1820-1896), Tylor (1832-1917) and Frazer (1854-1941). All of these scholars saw magic as a flawed version of science, a departure from rationality on the basis of a misunderstanding of the nature of cause and effect. Frazer takes this general statement to an intriguing conclusion as he seeks to actually find the flawed logic that allows for such beliefs to exist, namely in the laws of similarity and contagion. Tylor for his part, recognizes that these flawed beliefs can continue to exist even in supposedly more advanced societies, but he still affirms a progressive model that permits him to continue to denigrate these beliefs as primitive.[47]

The sway of these evolutionary models can still be felt in some of the modern scholars' attempts to use and define the term theurgy. The study of theurgy roughly began with Wilhelm Kroll and his collection and translation of the Chaldean Oracles. This work was closely followed by Bidez, Hopfner, and Eitrem. Hopfner and Eitrem were quick to point to the relationship between the views expressed in the Oracles and those seen in another collection of texts that were receiving attention at that time: the Greek Magical Papyri.[48] Since then, the study of theurgy has been closely tied to the study of magic, astrology, and alchemy in Late Antiquity. Modern definitions of theurgy include "religious magic," "a system of ritual purification based on a magical view of the universe," and "religious ends reached through magical means."[49] These definitions originate both in an evolutionary theoretical framework, but also in Augustine

---

[46] Graham Cunningham, *Religion and Magic* (New York University Press, 1999), pp. 2-5.
[47] Cunninghamm, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 15-22.
[48] This summary is taken from Dodds, "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism" *The Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947): 57.
[49] "Religious magic" (Sheppard 1982); "ritual purification (Wallis 1972); religious ends/magical means (Dodds 1947, paraphrased by Janowitz 2002, 3).

who claims that theurgists are deceitfully trying to avoid the charge of illegal witchcraft by using theurgy as a euphemism for magic.[50]

The problem with such definitions is that some theurgists deemphasized the similarity between what they were doing and magic.[51] And scholars should not take Augustine at face value without considering the viewpoint of the theurgists themselves. After all, there are many terms, concepts, and ideas, which exist solely within the cultural imagination of a given group, but which must be taken seriously if one is to understand the group's social reality.

At least one later Neoplatonist, Damascius, makes mention of magic and theurgy in a grammatically parallel statement. While discussing the life of the philosopher Theosebius, Damascius states that Theosebius once tried to exorcize a demon from a woman. He writes that Theosebius had no idea how to proceeed since "he understood nothing of magic (*mageuein*) nor had he ever studied theurgy (*theourgiasma)*."[52] Even without such specialized knowledge, however, Theosebius was apparently aware enough of a basic formula as he was able to invoke both the rays of Helios and the Jewish God. The difficulty with such a saying is determining just what is the force of the grammatical statement. Are we to see these as two examples of the same thing, or are we rather to see this as an example of hendiadys, the splitting of one single complex idea into two conjunctive parallel statements?

Sociological Approaches:

Another avenue for understanding is the productive and ongoing debate in anthropological and sociological studies concerning the question of whether there really are categorical differences between magic, religion, and science. Rodney Stark has recently offered a useful model, but his work does not address the problem of theurgy explicitly, and so it must be modified to some degree, since theurgy does not neatly fit Stark's classification of either magic or religion. According to Stark, magic, religion and science are all methods used by human beings to control the natural world. Magic and religion, in contrast to science, utilize the supernatural, which Stark defines as "forces or entities beyond or outside nature which can

---

[50] …for they wish to discriminate between those whom the people call magicians, who practice 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. (CD IX)

[51] So, for example, Proclus, *Commentary on the Republic* I. 255.19 and I.29.14; cited in Janowitz, *Icons*, 12.

[52] Athanassiadi (trans.) *PH*, frag. 46b.

suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces."[53] Stark goes on to say that magic is largely an impersonal force, utilized by the individual "by their own efforts" and is therefore "distinct from appealing to divine powers by sacrifice or prayer."[54] On the basis of the impersonality or mechanistic aspects of magic, Stark claims that magic cannot inspire morality. He predicts that magic will not make references to religious justifications, [55] but this is disproved by Porphyry, who explicitly says that magicians will make use of traditional piety to maintain necessary purity for their rites. Though they will not pursue assiduously the practice of piety for its own sake, which would lead to their overall adoption of a holy nature and which in turn would make it impossible for them to be sorcerers, nonetheless they utilize the technology of religion, parasitically, in order to achieve their aims.[56]

Stark's definition again fails to comprehend the theurgic worldview when he states that magicians are not concerned with bigger questions of meaning. In the case of the theurgists, at least, many of the sayings provided in the Chaldean Oracles are given apparently in response to some deep questions about the cosmological makeup of the universe.

In both of these instances, Stark's definition has actually proven to be useful for analytically classifying theurgy and theurgy-like practices as religion, however, these practices are traditionally associated with magic by both opponents and supporters. The opponents tend to associate theurgy with magic in order to demonstrate its apparent illegality. The supporters associate theurgy with magic in order to magnify the amazing power of the theurgist proper and to garner some charisma.

Problems especially arise when we apply modern considerations of magic to magic as understood by philosophers in Late Antiquity and try to extrapolate on the basis of these claims that philosophers in antiquity felt and thought the same way as philosophers in modern universities. Martha Nussbaum, in a recent and well-received work, *Therapy of Desire*, seeks to analytically understand Hellenistic philosophy. She classifies her object of interest as philosophy, but focuses on the particular way philosophy seeks to deal with real world problems, through what she calls "therapeutic argument." Therapeutic arguments are arguments that use familiar argumentative strategies but do so with "their own rhetoric and their own literary

---

[53] Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," *Review of Religious Research* 43, no. 2 (2001): 108.
[54] Stark, "Reconceptualizing," 109.
[55] Stark, "Reconceptualizing," 113.
[56] Porphyry, Abstincence. 2.45, trans. Gillian Clark in Sorabji (ed.), *Philosophy of the Commentators* vol. 1, p. 373.

style."[57] Nussbaum, to her credit, recognizes that ancient philosophy and modern philosophy have little in common, but her category of therapeutic argument stretches the limitations of philosophy in order to save her topic of interest from an attack of irrationality. She therefore condemns persons and ideas that do not meet her definition of rationality as non-critical. "Other figures in the culture---soothsayers, magicians, astrologers, politicians---all claim to provide what people want, without asking them to think critically and argue."[58]

The problem with this kind of argument is that it unfairly dichotomizes philosophy with rationality and assumes philosophy cannot partake of any kind of irrationality. This historically is simply not the case, and we would do well to remember Stark's caveat, that even if philosophers like Democritus stumbled upon modern scientific/rational principles like atomic theory, they did so as a result of ideas and procedures that have no relationship to modern experimental reasoning. They, in short, were lucky.

The worst consequence of this is that philosophy becomes a subject disconnected from its history and the social circumstances that led to its arrival, and consequently modern readers become less critical of that origin. In all of these cases, we see that the modern scholarly readers of the texts import to their readings their own notions of rationality. What they ignore is the potential existence of other ideals of rationality. The cultural codes surrounding ideas like "rationality" and "logic" may have shifted.

The historical record shows philosophy and "irrational" magic on much closer terms than philosophers like Nussbaum might like. In fact, philosophy occasionally offered justification for the ravings of soothsayers, magicians, and astrologers. Philosophia, the love of wisdom, is thus a term that has embraced many more definitions other than the one it currently holds.

Rather than looking for the strength of ancient philosophy in its rationale and logical argumentation, it may be fruitful to investigate the actual social functions of the philosophical schools. After all, educators were the instigators and arbiters of culture, the "guardians of language" (as states the title of a modern work).[59] In the second century the rise of the second sophistic tended to deemphasize the philosophical in favor of the rhetorical, but there were

---

[57] Nussbaum, "Introduction 2009," *Therapy of Desire*, xi.
[58] Nussbaum, Introduction 2009, *Therapy of Desire,* xi., cf. 353.
[59] Robert A. Kaster, *The Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1997).

nonetheless still seeds of philosophical speculation present, as there always will be if a given group spends an extended period of time thinking about language.

Who was Iamblichus?

Having digressed sufficiently on the general questions of our subject, I return again to the history as it has reached us today. In order to better understand the position of Iamblichus as philosopher, it will be beneficial to understand where he fits in to the history of Neoplatonism. Most of the details of Iamblichus's life are given in Eunapius's *Lives of the Philosophers*. Iamblichus of Chalcis was born sometime around the year 240 in Chalcis, Syria. He was the son of a family of some financial means.[60] We know nothing of his parents or siblings. His homeland was prosperous and Iamblichus's family apparently held some importance. John Dillon cites some evidence that suggests one of Iamblichus's ancestors may even have been the founder of the city of Chalcis, which would certainly give him quite the pedigree and probably provided him with sufficient financial means to support his education and the establishment of his own school later on.[61]

Iamblichus traveled to Caesarea some time around 270 and studied under Anatolius, a famous Aristotelian teacher who later became Bishope of Caesarea.[62] This Anatolius was a student of Longinus, the great Greek orator known today only for his work *On the Sublime*. After completing his studies under Anatolius, Iamblichus apparently enrolled under Porphyry when the latter returned to Rome after a trip to Sicily. As it happens, the only evidence for the teacher-student relationship between Iamblichus and Porphyry is the existence of a dedication by Porphyry to Iamblichus in his [Porphyry's] work *Concerning [the Saying] 'Know Thyself'*[63] Scholars have inferred much in the relationship between Porphyry and Iamblichus, projecting onto the two a rather antagonistic relationship on the basis of their apparently diverging philosophies. Dillon suggests that Iamblichus was a somewhat older student by the time he came under the tutelage of Porphyry and on this basis argues that Iamblichus would not have been a

---

[60] Iamblichus's name is Semitic, meaning "He is king" (*ya-mliku*) and modern scholars have commented on the oddity that his name was never translated into Greek (Dillon, "Iamblichus," 867) It may be that the name, Iamblichus, was authoritative enough in its own right, bearing a sufficient degree of cultural prestige, and so there would be no need to translate the name to Greek.
[61] Dillon, "Iamblichus," 865.
[62] Ibid. 867.
[63] Ibid. 868.

dutiful disciple but would, in fact, have been a problematic student, eager to distinguish himself from his teacher.[64]

Iamblichus's son married a female disciple of Plotinus, Amphicleia as related in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* .[65] From this, we may deduce that Iamblichus was perhaps in an even better position to take up Plotinus's mantle than Porphyry, in spite of the apparent philosophical disagreements between Plotinus and Iamblichus.

Aside from these simple facts and the interpretations here provided, we know very little about Iamblichus. The man himself remains a mystery.

What is the *De Mysteriis*?

The actual name of the work in question is *The Reply of the Master Abammon to the Letter of Porphry to Anebo and the Solutions to the Questions it Contains*. The more common title, *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum* is the addition of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) who published a Latin translation in 1497. For the sake of space the work will henceforth be referred to as the *DM*. The *DM* is a letter sent in answer from "the Master Abammon" to Porphyry on the occasion of Porphyry having sent a letter to Anebo. There is no way to know when Porphyry sent his original letter, but scholars seem to agree that the *DM* was written ca. 300 CE. The authorship has largely been settled as well On the basis of a note by Proclus in his *Commentaries on the Parmenides* (I.386.9-13), scholars widely accept that "Abammon" is in fact a pseudonym for Iamblichus, Porphyry's student.[66]

The *DM* survives in twenty four manuscripts, labeled A-X. These twenty four manuscripts are then divided into two groups based on their source text (hyparchetype). A has been called the source text for manuscripts B-O (14), and P is the source for manuscripts Q-X (8). The editorial standard is that of Édouard Des Places which takes into account the two main hyparchetypes as well as fragments and emendations from later translators including Bessarion (1403-1472) and Ficino.[67] The translation referred to throughout this thesis is that of Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell, an English translation strongly based on Des Places's French.

---

[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 866.
[66] *DM*, "Introduction," xxvii-xxviii.
[67] All manuscript details are from *DM*, "Introduction," xiii-xiv.

The *DM* has been called a number of things from a "manifesto of irrationalism,"[68] to an "apology for theurgy" but its true genre is "problems and solutions." The genre existed as early as Xenocrates (396-314 BCE), who wrote a work entitled *Solution of Logical Problems*.[69] From as early as the early Hellenistic period, this genre existed in philosophical circles, and it had a particular staying power with the Neoplatonists. A work falsely attribute to Aristotle, for example, contains thirty-eight books of *Problems* where the author simply categorized and listed a number of problems, facts and theories associated with those problems, and his own attempts toward solutions. Porphyry wrote *Questions on Homer*, *Collection of Questions on Rhetoric*, and *Miscellaneous Questions*. Damascius, the last leader of the Platonic academy in Athens wrote *Problems and Solutions on First Principles*.[70]

With this in mind, we can avoid, I hope, trying to describe the *DM* as anything like a systematic philosophical treatise. The *DM* is far from systematic, and tends rather to be a collection of stream of consciousness rambling on the specific questions of Porphyry's original letter. We should not, however, judge Iamblichus too harshly or hold him to a standard that did not exist in the ancient world. For one thing, he acknowledges his tendency to intellectually roam through ideas and only apologizes for this by noting that "the greatest subjects of study deserve to attract correspondingly great attention, and to be given close examination over a substantial period of time."[71] Moreover, it seems to me that Iamblichus's work corresponds to an act much like a jazz composition. Provided with a series of seemingly discordant musical phrases by Porphyry, Iamblichus tries to reestablish a general feeling of order and coherency. As to whether or not he succeeds, i.e. whether or not his philosophy is coherent, is something I choose not to comment on.

Description of the arguments of Porphyry's letter

Porphyry in his *Letter to Anebo*[72] presents a number of problems, claims, and arguments. The letter itself presents some difficulties for the historian. No existing copy survives. The letter

---

[68] Dodds, *Theurgy,* 59.
[69] Dillon *Middle Platonists* 23.
[70] This discussion on the "questions and answers" (*erotapokriseis*) genre is from *DM*, "Introduction," xlviii.
[71] *DM* 203.
[72] Angelo Sodano reconstructed the *Letter* and published it in 1958. Unfortunately, this text was unavailable to me at the time of the writing of this thesis. I have therefore relied on an online transcription of Thomas Taylor's 1821 translation. This text is in the public domain and available at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org). Parenthetical page numbers correspond to those provided on the website.

as we have it is a collection of fragments, some found in the *DM* itself where it seems Iamblichus is quoting the original letter and some in Eusebius. Unlike some scholars, I do not believe it is possible to impute to the letter any specific attitude, or to see Porphyry on the offensive against Iamblichus's system.[73] Rather Porphyry simply seems to be raising a number of questions out of intellectual curiosity.[74] The questions are not easily laid out, for Porphyry has in mind many connections between ideas that to modern eyes do not follow. Moreover, many of the issues he raises that are related to each other are separated by non sequitors, making it difficult to see the any structure to the presentation of the questions. In the interests of presenting this information as coherently as possible, I will dissect and rearrange the individual points under two basic headings, theory and practice, noting where there are crossovers between these two categories. My intent in presenting the contents of the letter is to give the reader some idea of the questions to which Iamblichus responds in the *DM*.

In the first place, Porphyry asks a number of questions about the theoretical basis for theurgic practice. He asks about the types of gods there are, how they are assigned to various places in the world, and whether there are any relations among the various genera. He wonders about the corporeality of the gods and what kind of bodies they possess, if any. He is curious about the theory of good and bad gods. He wants to know if there are any connections between the visible deities (sun, moon, stars, planets) and the invisible deities. He asks about Egyptian theological/philosophical speculation on the first cause and "whether it is intellect, or above intellect." He notes that according to the first century Greek Stoic Chaeremon, Egyptian myths are parables of astronomy, descriptions of celestial phenomena couched in anthropomorphizing.

Porphyry is also very concerned about the ritual particulars of the theurgists. He asks why the theurgists seem to sacrifice exclusively to subterranean gods when they know that the gods exist only in the heavens. He questions the efficacy of sacrifice in general, since he holds that the gods are incorporeal and thus insusceptible to any kind of action of human beings to coerce them. He wants to know what specific phenomena are indicative of the presence of a

---

[73] Dillon, for example, reads the *Letter* as "recantation of [Porphyry's] early beliefs." (Dillon, "Iamblichus," 868-86). For an example of scholars reading hostility into Porphyry's letter see *DM*, "Introduction," xxix. Athanassiadi, however, (see the note below) suggests that Porphyry's apparent "hostility" is actually nothing more than an attempt to better understand a complicated ongoing debate. Thus, it is an example of playing devil's advocate.

[74] Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus," *Journal of Roman Studies* Vol. 83 (1993): 117 notes how Eusebius profited greatly from this tendency on the part of Porphyry to remain open minded and address multiple perspectives.

divine being and how one can distinguish a good spirit from a bad spirit. He asks many questions about divination, especially about determining the value of dreams in various stages of sleep, of various practices associated with divination, including the dances of various cults, the drinking of sacred springs, and the use of magical symbols that are drawn, stood upon, and contemplated, potions, vapors, and other such material means to spiritual ends. He asks about circumstances where divination is not divinely inspired, but rather simply an effect of madness (a passion of the soul), but then he questions this again and asks if there is some relationship between madness and divine inspiration. He is also interested in the theurgic use of threats as in spells to coerce deities to speak the truth or otherwise do one's bidding. He also questions the use of "names without signification" and of various foreign tongues. Such obscurantism is pointless if, as Porphyry asserts, the gods are not bound to specific nations and so do not speak human languages. Porphyry further asks about the "particular demon." This was a specific type of spirit, one allotted to each individual, who would guide the course of one's life. Porphyry asks for details as to how this demon is astrologically determined. He notes however, that this demon is invoked by a general invocation in use among all men, which may suggest a universal ritual meant to access this being.

Porphyry's questions do indeed seem biting at times. For example, he notes in the final paragraph of his letter the ridiculousness of involving divine inspiration in human affairs:

> but by those who have devised the means of associating with beings more excellent than man, if the investigation of this subject is omitted, wisdom will be professed by them in vain; as they will only disturb a divine intellect about the discovery of a fugitive slave, or the purchase of land, or, if it should so happen, about marriage, or merchandize (16).

At other times, however, his comments seem to concede more ground than they take and it seems wrong to conclude that Porphyry's own views on the subject of theurgy are absolutely hostile. While he doubts the truth of many of the theurgists claims, he nonetheless seems to allow for the limited usefulness of a number of practices that we might term theurgic:

> For those who invoke the divinities for this purpose, have about them stones and herbs, bind certain sacred bonds, which they also dissolve, open places that are shut, and change the deliberate intentions of the recipients, so as from being depraved to render them worthy, though they were before depraved. Nor are the artificers of efficacious images to be despised. For they observe the motion of the celestial bodies, and can tell from the concurrence of what star with a certain star or stars, predictions will be true or false; and also whether the things that are performed will be inanities, or significant and efficacious, though no divinity or daemon is drawn down by these images. (8-9)

As we can see the "makers of efficacious images" use "stones and herbs," they "bind" and "dissolve" sacred bonds, and render "depraved" people "worthy" in some sense. The technique described here is called theurgic a few lines earlier, but it is significant that Iamblichus will later criticize the "makers of efficacious images" for having an improper understanding of how theurgy works.[75]

It is unfortunate that the letter has not survived in a more complete form and in more sources than Eusebius and Iamblichus. Both figures had good reason to emphasize parts of the letter over others and thus present a corrupted document. It is further unfortunate that we lack any kind of response from Porphyry upon having received the *Letter to Anebo*. We do not know the final result of the exchange. However, if the letter was meant to curtail the practices of theurgy in Iamblichus's school, it manifestly failed.

Despite the difficulties in determining historical details, Porphyry's *Letter* is nonetheless a useful document in that it demonstrates something of an outsider's perspective on theurgy. It indicates the Porphyry knew of the existence of the theurgists and theurgy, and this may suggest the subject's popularity. Porphyry's descriptions of theurgy further points to a series of recognizable ritual practices, uses of *materia magica*, which strongly coincides with common understandings of how magic worked in the ancient world. However, it would be impossible to conclude from this that Porphyry condemned theurgy as bad magic. As we have already seen, Porphyry is a difficult writer to pin down on any one point of view. In another work, the *De Abstinentia*, Porphyry goes to some trouble to discuss who the true holy man is. He wants to distinguish magicians who use the technology of holiness from actual holy men who live piously all the time. (2.45-2.61)[76]

Indeed, it may be that Porphyry's whole purpose in writing the *Letter to Anebo* was to obtain some kind of logical explanation for how the theurgists could be holy men. All of his questions about the nature of the gods and the theurgists relationship to them centered on finding the connection between these two in order to determine once and for all whether the theurgists could properly be called holy men, and thus decide where they stood in Porphyry's dichotomy.

---

[75] *DM* 189

[76] Trans. Gillian Clark in Sorabji (ed.), *Philosophy of the Commentators*, vol. 1(Duckworth, 2004), 373.

The *Status Quaestionis* of Theurgy and Neoplatonism

I have already hinted at some of the ongoing debates and questions in the fields of Neoplatonism and Theurgy. Here, I wish only to review the way the discussion has progressed over the years to better situate my own humble attempt. The mid-twentieth century attempts to understand theurgy in the works of such scholars as Dodds and Lewy focused on demonstrating the irrationality and foreignness of theurgical practice. More recently, scholarship has swung the pendulum in precisely the opposite direction, focusing on the inherently rigorous logic and of Iamblichean theurgy and its coherence with earlier Platonic theory. John F. Finamore, for example, in his work, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* (American Classical Studies 14, Scholars Press, 1985) offers no apology for the usefulness of Iamblichus as a modern philosopher but instead addresses the topics, definitions, and processes that Iamblichus raises as concepts in themselves. In other words, he systematizes Iamblichus and then explains how that system works under its own terms and in association with previous philosophers, from whom Finamore believes Iamblichus derives much of his tradition.[77] Greg Shaw follows much the same methodology, forgoing questions of rationality and focusing instead on Iamblichean theurgy as a system as such. He concludes, like Finamore, that Iamblichus actually has more in common with the doctrines of Plato. Theurgy is a performative act which signifies a positive valuation of the material universe, one that Shaw claims is present in Plato. Thus, Shaw concludes, Iamblichus is more honest to Plato than the starkly dualistic Plotinus.[78]

Scholars in the field of Gnosticism and Neoplatonism have been increasingly interested in comparing the religious traditions found in the theurgic writings (e.g. *Chaldean Oracles*), and the more philosophical discussions found in the Neoplatonists, to the cosmologies in Gnosticism. These scholars aim to explain the origin and the fluidity of the "Gnostic" writings in Late Antiquity. Zeke Mazur has recently even argued, in a much better substantiated return to claims previously made by Samson Eitrem and Philip Merlan, about Plotinus's status as a magician on the basis of his periphrastic description of mystical techniques which Mazur claims to find

[77]John Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul*, American Classical Studies (Scholars Press, 1985), 166.
[78] Shaw, *Theurgy,* 2, 6, 10.

among the Gnostics.[79] Birger Pearson wrote a most illuminating article on "Theurgic Tendencies in Gnosticism,"[80] where he utilizes a similar theory to explain a systemized account of Gnostic ritual in terms of Iamblichean theurgy.

Simultaneous to this development among scholars of Gnosticism, there has been a movement to better understand the position of pagan holy men in general. Works like Garth Fowden's important article on the characteristics of the pagan holy men of Late Antiquity[81] reestablish the discussion of theurgy and its principle exponents in a social-historical framework. Eschewing the complicated issues of philosophy, Fowden's work addresses a dizzying number of historical sources in order to sketch a picture of the social relationships of Late Antiquity and the position of Iamblichean theurgists in that mileu. In the same vein, Edward Watts' *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* [82] describes the educational world of the fourth and fifth centuries from an historical vantage and discusses the theurgists within this world. Watts's project focuses on the complex nature of competition in the educational world of Late Antiquity as well as on the relationships among students and teachers. Dominic O'Meara's *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*[83] seeks to form to some extent a bridge between the historical details provided in works like Fowden and Watts and the more philosophical discussions in the previously mentioned scholars. O'Meara seeks to reinvigorate the Neoplatonists as political philosophers, who, despite their apparent rituals of exclusive divinization, actually understand this divinization to occur within a political context. Whereas Fowden and Watts focus primarily on ancient historical sources, O'Meara attempts to read this historicity back into the philosophers themselves and see evidence of social ethics within the Neoplatonists. The attempt is interesting in that it connects the supposedly private quest of Neoplatonism for apotheosis with a political philosophy. O'Meara notes especially that

---

[79] See Merlan, "Plotinus and Magic," *Isis* 44, no. 4 (1953): 341-48. Criticized by Armstrong, "Was Plotinus a Magician?" *Phronesis* 1, no. 1 (1955): 73-79. For Mazur's work, see. "*Unio Mystica*" Dionysius 21 (Dec. 2003): 23-52.

[80] In *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. R.T. Wallis, *International Society for Neoplatonic Studies* (State University of New York Press, 1992): 253-267.

[81] Garth Fowden, "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 33-59.

[82] (University of California Press, 2006), especially pp. 85-96.

[83] (Oxford University Press, 2003).

divinization in the ancient world involved acquisition of political and civil virtues in addition to virtues and powers of a more mystical nature.[84]

The present thesis aims at a study similar to that of Fowden, Watts and O'Meara. I seek to understand theurgy not only specifically philosophical tradition, but as a social phenomenon. Like Fowden and Watts I seek to understand the social position of the holy men and schools in late antique society. Like O'Meara I hope to see evidence of this position within the very texts of the tradition, specifically within Iamblichus's *De Mysterii*s.

Theory and Method

I propose in this thesis to view the writings of the theurgists from a new perspective. Instead of focusing on the philosophical content of the theurgists I shall highlight and extract from the text evidence of a group identity whose cohesion is centered around the possession of a specialized knowledge.

As discussed in the previous section, the earliest scholarly discussions on theurgy were highly critical and sought to confine the tradition within an intellectualist discourse of rationality within which theurgy would always be seen as a failure of will power, as a last resort of the pagans in light of the seemingly inevitable triumph of Christianity. Such an interpretation was thus strongly tied to an overall perspective on what Late Antiquity meant historically, namely the death throes of paganism.

More recently scholars have criticized this approach for its reliance on a dubious retro-projection of positivistic rationality onto ancient philosophers, as well as its reliance on a historical model of human history that overemphasizes a decline in culture from 200 to 600 CE. Describing culture in terms of "rises" and "falls" often conceals ideological principles about what culture really is, and these ideologies can obscure our understanding of the actual nature of historical processes. A more moderate theoretical foundation is thus to see the period of Late Antiquity as a time of change, which should call even more attention to it as it is within this blend of cultures that the structures of later societies were crafted.

In order to derive a plausible sketch of the cultural constructs described in Iamblichus's *DM*, I attempt to find a middle way between two disparate methods: philological analysis and sociological criticism. Extrapolating from the above notion that philosophy inherently construes

---

[84] Dominic O'Meara, *Platonopolis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 62-68.

and preserves ideology, I seek to find within the *DM* evidence of group identity. In the remainder of this section, I provide more detailed information on the theoretical and methodological foundations of this work.

Theory: Discourse theory

This work depends heavily on the theories of Hugh B. Urban who builds his own theories on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu is part of a tradition of scholarly research in the field of discourse theory. Discourse theory is essentially the idea that linguistic structures always aim at projecting a particular worldview onto reality. This theory is particularly prevalent in the writings of the historian, philosopher, and critical theorist Michel Foucault, who brought scholarly attention to the way language, especially language under the aegis of science, operated as a means of power in defining the roles of people. Foucault applied his theories especially to historical definitions of insanity,[85] and sexuality.[86] Bourdieu, for his part, concentrates on how verbal/linguistic concepts can be exchanged in real-world economic applications (i.e. symbolic capital is transferrable to real capital). This too, is an aspect of discourse in that it represents language as having an impact on reality.

The discursive space created by texts should be thought of as a fictional, or ideal world, that is, a constructed world, wherein normal laws of reality are suspended. In such a space, an author like Iamblichus, can describe the fantastic apparitions that result from theurgy, things that modern scholars from an etic perspective must look upon with some skepticism, but which, we can safely assume on the basis of its very existence, must have had some kind of influence on the audience of the *De Mysteriis*. Also within such a world, Iamblichus can describe the structure of a group or distinguish human beings according to criteria that exist solely within his own system. In other words, simply by declaring that a group is different or inferior, Iamblichus creates a truth claim whose only validity lies within the claim itself. However, for a society that may not necessarily have the complex apparatus of ideological criticism provided through discourse theory,

It might be thought that such a reading of texts is an unnecessary convolution, but it is in this complication that the reader is better able to appreciate things that are perhaps not so obvious but nonetheless present, latent within the text.

---

[85] *Madness and Civilization* (
[86] *History of Sexuality* (3 vols.)

Method: Reading philosophical texts in a new light

We cannot know the audience that specifically read the *DM*. As already mentioned we do not know if Porphyry ever actually received the *DM* in reply to his original letter or how he understood its contents. To complicate matters, there has, as of yet, been no authoritative study on the intertextuality of the later Neoplatonists and the *DM*, so we do not have any information on who read and absorbed its contents. Furthermore, in light of the "death of the author" we cannot extrapolate from the text itself any kind of description of the contents of Iamblichus's own mind. That being said, we can treat the text as a text in itself that seeks to say something and to propound a specific image of the world. That is to say, we can read the text as a product and producer of culture (cf. theory section, above). Moreover, we can assume that if the text is to be effective in any way, it must utilize its symbols and cultural codes in a way that is coherent to its audience. To that extent at least, the text has a meaning and a purpose and its words are semantically relevant.

Assuming, then, on this basis that the text has a meaning that corresponds to some extent with the actual world, I propose to read the *De Mysteriis* as a work of ideal auto-ethnography. This means that the work describes and reinforces a particular insider's perspective on the world, but that world is necessarily an ideal textual construct. There is no way to determine from the text alone whether the text corresponds in any way with the real world. It is far better to simply recognize that the text posits an ideal world and then try to understand how this ideal world functions under the rules as espoused in the text itself.

This understanding of how texts work could be applied in any number of ways. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to explore the theme of secrecy in the *DM* through the lens of modern sociological theories concerning secrecy in religion. This theoretical model permits one to effectively see how linguistic boundaries are formed between outsiders and insiders within the discourse of the text itself, often by simply declaring pointedly that one's understandings are incorrect on the basis of not being in-the-know.

In the 1980s, secrecy came into its own as a theoretical concept worthy of sociological analysis. Two particular collections of conference proceedings from this time stand out: one a volume edited by Stanton K. Tefft entitled *Secrecy* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980) collected the scholarly researches of a number of anthropological and sociological papers and

attempted to provide on the basis of those papers a general theoretical framework within which to consider various instances of secrecy. The other, a volume edited by Kees W. Bolle entitled *Secrecy in Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1987) collected a series of essays especially pertinent to the appearance of secrecy in religion.

The two works represent diverging approaches to the study of secrecy in religion. The former volume predominantly addresses the subject of secrecy and its various manifestations, whether familial, political, commercial, or religious, as a human social phenomenon. The primary focus of these essays is on how secrecy establishes particular relationships between human beings. The other collection of essays, the Bolle volume, opens with a meditation, entitled "Secrecy in Religion" wherein Bolle argues that secrets are universal forms in human lives. Bolle criticizes the "disease of academe, infected by positivism" for its gradual debasement of secrecy to a mere concealment of information. For Bolle, secrecy also connotes a sense of "mystery" which he defines as the secret that continues to be a secret even upon being revealed.[87] While Bolle perhaps overstates his point, he does reveal a useful distinction between mystery and secrecy. He is quick to note however, that this distinction is not strong, the two categories are still related, and according to Bolle, secrecy is a social response to "something prior and more important," namely mystery.[88]

I think it worth noting that Bolle's own distinction between social restriction of information and mystery parallels developments in religious studies surrounding the concept of "religion" in general. Some present-day anthropologists and sociologists have been at pains to demonstrate that "religion" as such is an empty category, reducible to more generalized analysis. On the other hand, scholars in the field of religious studies continue to maintain that there is something about religion that evades such reductions. Under this perspective, there is a need to understand religion on its own terms.

Defining Secrecy

Secrets can be natural, mystical, or manufactured. Natural secrecy is not so important for this essay. For the sake of completeness, however, this kind of secrecy appears in, for example, seventeenth century scientific texts, where nature itself is thought to contain "arcana," "secrets,"

---

[87] Bolle, "Secrecy in Religion" in *Secrecy in Religions* ed. Kees W. Bolle (Brill, 1987), pp. 2-3.
[88] Bolle 3.

and "mysteries."[89] The use of such language indicates that nature itself was thought to be a mysterious, hidden thing that only yielded up its secrets to those willing to make the effort of observation and experimentation. This kind of language demonstrates a scientific rhetoric that draws upon the language of the following two kinds of secrecy.

The mystical secret falls more clearly into the domain of religious studies. Mysticism is a difficult concept to define, however it inevitably seems to be tied to the existence of concepts, entities and spaces other than the material. In the mystical worldview the material world does not reveal the whole of reality, but rather masks the existence of a "higher" world (spatial terminology is often used). Such mystical worlds are posited as being accessible through a variety of methods and techniques including cult activity, Platonic mania, or Plotinian contemplation. The quintessential examples of mystical secrecy are the contents of the mystery religions of ancient and late antique Greece.[90] These cults were astoundingly successful at keeping their rites secret, to the point where our awareness about them today is unfortunately dim. We know that the mysteries were associations of men and sometimes women who reenacted in their rites some specific mythology (Mithraic, Isisian, Kybelian, Dionysian, etc.). The end result of such practices was reception of a special relationship with the mythical figures in question and subsequent special treatment in the after-life.

Manufactured secrets are those secrets for which human beings claim guardianship. Whereas the secrets of nature and the mystical traditions are thought to be kept secret by virtue of cosmological principles' natural hiddenness or the will of the gods, manufactured secrets are purely human secrets. These secrets are much more apparent in modern contemporary society and concern the preservation of personal life, technological developments, economic superiority, political insurrection, and bureaucratic structures.

At the sociological level, distinctions between these types of secrecy break down. Sociologically, one cannot attribute secrecy to inanimate objects or non-scientifically verifiable entities. Instead, secrecy must be considered as a purely human phenomenon. Natural secrecy and mystical secrecy are subsumed under the heading of manufactured secrecy. All types of secrecy share common strategies when viewed at this level. All secrets are thought to be a set of

---

[89] Himrod, "Secrecy in Modern Science" in *Secrecy in Religions*, 105.
[90] The classic work on mystery religions is Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, (Harvard University Press, 1987).

information or practices accessible to one group of people and inaccessible to another. There is inherent in such a distinction an element of antagonism.

Stanton K. Tefft, noting this element, has argued that conflict theory is the best means to understanding the role of secrets at the sociological level.[91] Conflict theory, originating in the writings of Marx and Weber and expanded upon by Dahrendorf (1959) and Mills (1958),[92] assumes that sociological structures are always in a state of entropy and require constant maintenance. These entropic forces can originate from both within a given group and outside of a given group, and often times, internal forces of change rapidly shift to external, as happens most apparently in the case of a schism. Within such a paradigm, the main means of control are power and status. Power and status determine who has the authority to control the cultural interests of a given group, who can force coherency on a structure whose basis lies in something as unstable as human whim.

One of the avenues recently postulated as a means to authority and power is the possession of secret knowledge. As Hugh Urban notes, building off the previous work of George Simmel, and informed with the vocabulary of Pierre Bourdieu, secrets are "adorning possessions," which "[give] the owner of concealed knowledge […] the mark of social distinction or status."[93] Like the previously explored theorists, Simmel and Urban confront the secret as a sociological concept, understandable within a context of human relationships. However, Urban brings something new to the table in seeing secrecy as an example of Bourdieusian "symbolic capital." Symbolic capital is essentially prestige and renown, and is exchangeable with the more familiar economic capital (money and possessions).[94] Understanding secrecy as an exchange of capital highlights a model of social interaction that conceives of human relationships as a struggle for prestige and power.

---

[91] Tefft, "Secrecy, Disclosure and Social Theory," in *Secrecy*, ed. Stanton K. Tefft (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980), 49 ff.
[92] See the "Introduction" to "Chapter 11: Conflict Theory" in Farganis, *Readings in Social Theory* 2nd ed. (McGraw-Hill, 1996), pp. 268-270.
[93] Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (University of California Press 2003), 3.
[94] Bourdieu *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 177.

Recently, Edward Watts has assessed the evidence of these struggles for students and honor in the academic marketplaces of Late Antiquity.[95] He notes that ancient teachers used as variety of coercive techniques to retain their students including "kidnapping," and "hazing." Teachers managed to stake out claims on certain harbors in Athens by means of which they would secure the students arriving at those harbors. When students arrived, they would be forced to join with one or another school, swear oaths, be given conflicting and confusing instructions designed to break down their egos, be initiated through public bathing, and then finally be invested with the robe of a scholar (*tribon*) marking them as different from their past selves and from any non-students they may meet in the city.[96]

The appearance of such complex social behavior supports a model of general antagonism among the schools in Late Antiquity calls to mind the complicated social situation of Late Antiquity and the struggles of various groups and organizations for members. If we apply this understanding to the *DM* we can read the text as an attempt to answer the questions of Porphyry by negotiating a complicated series of metaphysical views. In this respect, the *DM* attempts something new, and this potentially brings it into conflict with the collective presence of contemporary philosophies.

In the next section, I will discuss the political and historical forces at work in the late Roman Empire that contributed to this overall antagonism of the schools. This will provide us with at least the scholarly consensus on the historical reality of the fourth century. Having this in mind will then help us to better appreciate the way a philosopher like Iamblichus embroiders his own worldview onto this reality.

---

[95] See Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* and "The Student Self in Late Antiquity" in *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Michael L. Satlow, and Steven Weitzman (Indiana University Press, 2005), , 234-251.
[96] Watts, "Student," 237-239.

Chapter 1: Conflict in Late Antique Schools

In a recent article entitled "High Priests of the Highest God,"[97] Heidi Marx-Wolf sets out to prove that the world of the third century Platonists was suffused with antagonism. Philosophers, rhetoricians, and priests viewed one another as "rivals for certain kinds of social goods, such as authority and prestige."[98] In the following chapter I hope to explore her arguments as well as those of other scholars focused on the lives of teachers and students in Late Antiquity to demonstrate just how precarious the position of a teacher in the ancient world could be. This precariousness explains in part the need of Iamblichus to describe the teachings of his school in such stark exclusive terms, reifying a strong distinction between his group and imagined others and ensuring that his secrets do not leave the confines of his group and thus lose their controlling prestige.

To begin with, it is worth recalling that the idea of a school as it is today is non-existent in Late Antiquity. In their origins, institutions like the Academy and the Lyceum had an extremely loose organizational structure. Teachers and students gathered together in public locations like the garden of Academeus or in the private homes of their teachers and were taught whatever the teacher felt he had the expertise to teach. After the deaths of Plato and Aristotle, a succession (*diadochus*) was established in which the current head of the group would choose his successor from among the pupils. This succession was potentially the source of great prestige, much like the modern day prestige surrounding the great academic institutions of our own time.

Funding for these schools was provided by lands and property owned by the philosophers themselves, wealthy benefactors or from the pockets of students.[99] If a comparison between the philosophical schools and the more widely talked about rhetorical and law schools can be made, then examples given about some late antique students may be illustrative. Augustine's (354-430) family, for instance, struggled to pay for his early education and only did so with the understanding that there would be a social and financial pay off in the end.[100] Prohaeresius (ca.

---

[97] "High Priests of the Highest God" *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 4 (2010): 481-513.
[98] Marx-Wolf, "Priests," 487.
[99] Dorandi, . "Organization and Structure of Hellenistic Schools," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 59.
[100] *Confessions* 2.3.

4th century) and his friend Hephaestion similarly sacrificed to afford their education, sharing one academic cloak between the two of them and going to classes on alternating days.[101]

Fragmentations seem to have been a common enough occurrence[102] and these led to expansions of the schools far beyond their original domains. Satellite schools cropped up in colonial areas like "Asia Minor, Africa, the interior of Syria and Mesopotamia."[103] The presence of such satellite schools may have even contributed to the overall project of Hellenization, as it seems that many students used these "branches" of the original schools as stepping stones on their paths toward higher education. If they continued in their studies this would inevitably lead them to major institutions like Athens.[104] Thus, schools became great cultural melting pots of the empire.

In this world of cultural diversity, there was a need to enforce a status quo on students. As Watts has observed, describing the student life of the orator Libanius (313-194), students entering the metropolitan centers like Athens or Alexandria "literally entered into a new life" wherein they received "a new family," "new appearance, [the academic cloak]" and "a new set of acceptable behaviors."[105] Within this new socialization process, students were expected to swear oaths of loyalty to study only under their teacher and were de facto expected to take part in riots against philosophers of opposing schools.[106] Mutual participation in these activities, and sharing of the punishments that occasionally followed, served to strengthen the collegial atmosphere.

All these factors were also in place to maintain student reliance upon one school. Professors enforced these strictures to prevent student mobility to possible cheaper sources of what was essentially the same knowledge. In this way then, it is clear that competition was the chief concern in the academic world.

---

[101] Eunapius, *Vit. Soph.* 487; Watts, *City and School*, 50. This may be an exaggeration, but even if it is merely a joke it still successfully transmits the view that schooling could be oppressively expensive.
[102] Lynch, *Aristotle's School* (University of California Press, 1972), 151.
[103] Dorandi, 61.
[104] Dorandi 61.
[105] Watts, "Student," 237.
[106] Watts, "Student," 240: "student violence was actually an expression of loyalty that was reserved for only the most advanced students."

This competitive spirit is notable also in the Neoplatonic setting as well. Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus, Origen[107] and a little known figure, Herrenius, forced his three students to swear an oath of secrecy "that they would not reveal any of the doctrines which Ammonius had elucidated for them in his meetings."[108] In a footnote to this passage, Edwards notes that the Greek for meetings (*akroasein*), indicates that the three students were actually not privileged to the inner secrets of the group, as they were mere *akroatai* and not *gnorimoi*.[109] If Edwards is right, this would seem to indicate that Origen, Herrenius, and Plotinus were actually at the edges of Ammonius's school when they were forced to swear this oath. This would then further support the general claim that binding oaths and secrecy were a common feature among the various schools in Late Antiquity not only for the inner members, but also for more casual students as well.

We have already seen how oaths of loyalty and secrecy seem to indicate a general anxiety on the part of teachers about who has access to their teachings. This in turn seems to be related to the general attitude of competition among the various schools in the ancient world. It is worth reviewing in light of this antagonistic worldview the story of Plotinus and Olympius.[110] Olympius was an Alexandrian, whom Porphyry says had "pretensions to philosophy" and had "briefly been a pupil of Ammonius." Apparently out of jealousy over Plotinus's ability to attract students and "out of desire for precedence" Olympius assaults Plotinus. Porphyry says that Olympius's assaults went so far against Plotinus that "he even used magic in an attempt to injure him through the stars." The brief passage thus suggests that Olympius was a competing philosopher who made a number of attempts to injure Plotinus, finally resorting to magic. If we read this passage in conjunction with our current discussion about the various ways in which teachers competed with one another, we may even suppose that Olympius attempted more direct means before his magical warfare. Porphyry's language suggests that this was something of a last resort.

---

[107] Not the Christian Origen (184-254), see Edwards, *Saints* 6 n. 41.
[108] Edwards (trans.) *Life of Plotinus* 3 (p. 7).
[109] The *akroates* was merely someone who listened to lectures in an ancient school. There was a degree of prestige to this, but the closer relationship was between a teacher and his *gnorimoi*, intimate pupils "selected [on the basis of] their personal merit" (Watts, *City and School*, 31).
[110] Edwards (trans.) *Life of Plotinus* 3, p. 6.

Even among the Christians, issues of control and jealousy ran rampant among major figures. Origen the Christian (184-254) became the nexus of a controversy over the authority of Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria (189-232). Demetrius had initially shown favor towards Origen and assisted in his intellectual career, selecting him as the successor to Clement's school. However, this relationship was strained when Origen was asked by two other bishops to teach in church in Palestine around 215 CE. Origen was at this time not a priest and Demetrius objected to preaching from the unordained. When he heard of Origen's teaching, Demetrius ordered the philosopher to return to Alexandria, back to Demetrius's territory. Later, Origen again usurped his patron's authority, and was even ordained without Demetrius's permission. This led to Demetrius taking drastic measures against Origen, excommunicating him and banned him from ever teaching in Alexandria again. A letter from Jerome "suggests that the enmity was fueled by jealousy on the part of Demetrius because of Origen's popularity as a teacher."[111]

All of these examples then demonstrate a world that was governed by prestige and honor, where wars of influence were waged over the minds of students. In such a milieu it would be absolutely necessary to constantly demonstrate the superiority of one's own teaching or school.

We do not, unfortunately, have any explicit descriptions of Iamblichus's school that demonstrate these kinds of political and social negotiations of power. What we do have however, are two instances in Eunapius that might be usefully read in this context.

Eunapius offers a description of Iamblichus's persona as a teacher. He writes that Iamblichus was born of a wealthy family in Coele Syria. Eunapius gives us a surprisingly honest description of Iamblichus's writing style, saying that "his utterances are not imbued with charm and grace, they are not lucid, and they lack the beauty of simplicity."[112] Nevertheless, he "practiced moderation" and this somehow gave him "access to the ears of the gods," which in turn provided him many disciples.[113]

So, it seems, from Eunapius's description, that Iamblichus enjoyed a special connection to divinity, and this in turn served as a useful enough advertisement that he never lacked pupils. These pupils seem to have been particularly motivated by Iamblichus's supposed superhuman

[111] Marx-Wolf 490.
[112] Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 363.
[113] Ibid.

powers. One day, a group of students desiring to see something of this advertised power appointed a spokesperson who asked:

> O master, most inspired, why do you thus occupy yourself in solitude, instead of sharing with us your more perfect wisdom? Nevertheless a rumour has reached us through your slaves that when you pray to the gods you soar aloft from the earth more than ten cubits to all appearance; that your body and your garments change to a beautiful golden hue; and presently when your prayer is ended your body becomes as it was before you prayed, and then you come down to earth and associate with us.[114]

Iamblichus was charmed by this story and laughed, saying, "The facts are otherwise."[115] Still, such a story should alert us to the kinds of things Iamblichus's students expected him to be able to do and teach them to do in turn: flashy miracles.

In the narrative provided by Eunapius, Iamblichus's students were not disappointed for long. On one occurrence, after having finished a sacrifice Iamblichus and some disciples were walking back from the sacrificial site (one of Iamblichus's villas), when all of a sudden Iamblichus stopped talking and walking and stayed rooted to one spot. Abruptly he stated that the path on which they had been walking had been contaminated by a recent funeral procession. Eunapius reports that the majority of Iamblichus's disciples did not actually follow the teacher's advice but instead actively sought out the proof of this extra sensory perception. They remained on the road, looking for a dead body. Very soon after, the funeral procession returned and thus proved the truth of the master's prediction.[116]

According to Eunapius, while this was mildly impressive, the followers of Iamblichus were not satisfied with this display. They continued to pester Iamblichus who delayed them saying, "Nay, that does not rest with me, but wait for the appointed hour."[117] By happenstance the school went on a brief summer trip to Gadara where they could bathe in some truly superb baths. While there his disciples kept prodding Iamblichus to perform some kind of miracle, in response at last, Iamblichus smiled and said, "It is irreverent to the gods to give you this demonstration, but for your sakes it shall be done." Then Iamblichus told his disciples to ask the locals for the names of two nearby springs. His disciples do this, but Iamblichus declared that the

---

[114] Eunapius, *Philosophers,* 365.
[115] Ibid. 367.
[116] Ibid. 367-369.
[117] Ibid. 369.

names of the two springs are Eros and Anteros.[118] From the first spring, Iamblichus summoned by means of what appears to be a magic spell, a white skinned, golden haired youth. From the other, he summoned an exact copy of the first with a little darker hair. The boys then embraced Iamblichus "as though he were a real father." After this, Iamblichus sent them back into the springs and received the deserved adulation of his pupils. Eunapius adds that "[a]fter this the crowd of his disciples sought no further evidence, but believed everything from the proofs that had been revealed to them."[119]

Just as he could create positive miracles to draw pupils to him, so could Iamblichus deflate the claims of other would be miracle workers through his own insight. One day, a certain Egyptian priest invoked Apollo to visible appearance. This was understandably quite astounding, but Iamblichus, who was present spoke up and said, "My friends, cease to wonder; this is only the ghost of a gladiator."[120] While, if true, such a circumstance would be equally impressive to us, to the ancient mind summoning a dead gladiator would have been a paltry show of power, unworthy of a true philosopher. Iamblichus's biting comment thus further indicates a way in which philosophers may critique one another and their practices thus adding an additional arrow to the philosophical quiver with which philosophers eliminated their competition.

Iamblichus's ability to perform and discern these strange miracles is thus a testament to his character and to the truth of his teachings. It is fitting then that his pupils, most notably Maximus of Ephesus, continued to rely on showy displays of power to attract students. It is also worth recalling that in the case of the most famous political patron of Iamblichean theurgy, namely the Emperor Julian, this technique was highly effective.

---

[118] The story of Eros and Anteros is apparently preserved only in Themistius 304 D. Here the orator Themistius (317-390) relates a myth about Aphrodite asking Thetis for advice on how to make her son (Eros/Cupid) grow. Thetis tells Aphrodite that love will only grow in the presence of reciprocal love (Anteros). It is possible that Eros and Anteros here are meant to symbolize the collegial friendship that was so necessary in the ancient school system.
[119] Ibid. 371.
[120] Ibid. 425.

Chapter 2: Secrecy as Advertisement

As has already been mentioned in the introduction, early scholarly attempts at understanding Iamblichus's philosophy aimed distinguishing Iamblichus's brand of theurgy as something irrational. Scholars like Dodds cited Iamblichus's reliance on ritual practice over dialectical reasoning as evidence of irrationality, which in turn was tied to a perceived decline in pagan intellectual thought. In this theory, Iamblichean theurgy would seem to be simply the final pathetic attempt to hold onto traditional religious practices before the "fascination of the abyss" finally drew it to its inevitable demise.[121]

Such a perspective is difficult to support because it assumes pagans were aware of the final outcome of history and implies that passively accepted their fate. Such a reading of history has largely been discarded in favor of trying to return to a more contemporary and less presentist[122] understanding of the late antique world. Under this new perspective, Iamblichean theurgy, as well as a host of other seemingly new religious traditions, are not to be seen as evidence of decline, but rather as evidence of a slow shift in the religious worldview.

In the previous section, I tried to show some of the general features of this shift and how it was particularly present in the religious schools of Late Antiquity. In this section, I attempt to focus on the central text of this essay, the *DM* in order to show a very specific instance of conscious religious development.

The genius of Iamblichus's erudition lies not in any kind of intelligent presentation of facts themselves, but rather in Iamblichus's artful presentation of himself and the members of his group as possessing an esoteric knowledge. In pointing out examples where Iamblichus reveals this strategy of dealing with the aforementioned educational struggles of Late Antiquity I hope to show how Iamblichus uses secrecy as an advertisement and then connect this secrecy to the performance of miracles which has already been discussed in the preceding sections.

---

[121] Dodds, *Irrational*, 288.

[122] With the use of this term, I signify my acknowledgement of the ongoing theoretical debate surrounding the craft of the historian. The term plays a particularly important role in Elizabeth Clarke's *History, Theory, Text* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 18-22. Clarke describes in these pages the ongoing battle between historians who uphold a positivistic role of history and those who argue, like Michel de Certeau, that historians can only access the past through "the discourse of the present" (18). Presentist history, that is historical research that addresses the events of the past with the aim of understanding the present, is indeed extremely important work; however, the great danger is always that the historian twists the facts to suit his or her own ends. This, was the mistake of Dodds who sought to understand certain present patterns of anxiety (the continued existence of superstitious beliefs) in a model that presupposed these beliefs as a weakness resulting from some generalized anxiety disorder of the ancient world.

First, however, it will be necessary to delve more deeply into the nature of a secret as an "adornment" in the theory of Hugh Urban. Urban's primary field of interest is the collection of disparate and difficult to define practices known as Tantra. Tantra, like theurgy, has murky origins, and presents itself as a knowledge that has always been, some kind of parallel knowledge to more traditional cult practices from which it differs, while it is nonetheless seen as the fulfillment of them. Also like theurgy, Tantra seems to have risen in importance as something of a competitive, though, it should be noted not subversive, philosophico-magical practice in response to external socio-political forces of change, namely British colonization of the Indian subcontinent.

Urban's work on Tantra initially focused on a reappraisal of the function of esoteric traditions from a cross cultural perspective. He argues for a historically specific investigation of the universal functions of secrecy that figures like Kees Bolle and Mircea Eliade had theoretically posited. For his comparanda in his first study, Urban narrows his Tantric example to the Śrīvidyā school of Tantric thought (originating ca. 7th c. CE) and compares this to the teachings, practices and social mileu of The Rectified Scottish Rite of Freemasonry (arising in Lyons, France in 1770). Urban seeks to prove that these esoteric traditions were historically the provenance of the wealthy and the elite who, far from desiring to "overthrow existing religious and political structures," rather intended to "*reinforce* them or else *bend and reshape them* to suit their own private interests"[123]

As part of his theoretical apparatus, Urban notes that previous work on secrecy, such as that of George Simmel and Edward Shils relied too heavily on the content of secrecy. Urban argues that rather than focus on the content of these secrets, which are in the large unknowable because they are historically secret and may be guarded by any number of blinds and misdirections,[124] we should rather aim our attention at the very processes of secrecy, "the strategies and tactics […] through which secrets are concealed and revealed, to whom, in what contexts and through what relations of power they are exchanged."[125]

Urban's comparison successfully notes a number of intriguing similarities between these seemingly far distanced traditions. One, both traditions were conceived of by wealthy, learned

[123] Urban, "Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry," *Numen* 44, no. 1 (1997): 3, italics his.
[124] Urban calls these "active dissimulations." ("Elitism," 3.)
[125] Ibid.

men and within these systems, the status of these men was never challenged in spite of a rhetoric of egalitarianism.[126] Two, the secrets of both systems are tied into the transformation of the individual member by means of initiation into some kind of superior figure, "a new esoteric identity, a supreme Self."[127] In the case of Śrīvidyā this new self is described as being imbued with superhuman abilities, permitting it to do things that ordinarily would be transgressive to the tradition. Urban is quick to note, however, that the ability to do things is not the same as the license to do so. In fact, according to the logic of the system, the new self that the system dramatically articulates is precisely an esoteric self. Thus the initiation provides one with a dual-identity, wherein one is expected to outwardly maintain the strictures of purity according to the exoteric tradition, while inwardly one is permitted to transgress all they want, imaginatively and thus innocuously.[128] In the case of Freemasonry there is a similar creation of an esoteric self, tied to a symbolic recreation of the original Temple which is simultaneously imagined to be a reunification of the human and divine in the aftermath of the mythic Fall from Eden. In this case there is also a similar paradoxical reversal of the very purposes of the complex initiatic schema. Having built the Temple and developed the esoteric Self, which is in some sense seen to be an apotheosis or henosis on par with and derived from a nineteenth century interpretation of the Neopythagorean and Neoplatonist aims and practices, the initiate is then required to reattain their everyday self. This is Urban's explanation for how the Masons became an "old boys' club" where in addition to offering grand arcana that supposedly offer explanations of the inner workings of the universe, the lodge also provided tangible material benefits and business networks.[129]

Three, the hierarchic initiations in both traditions are seen to be secret and exclusive things towards which one must work and aspire for admission. These are great secrets given only to the few. There is thus, a passivity of the subject who must accept the pre-outlined hermeneutics of the group. The success of this hermeneutical strategy is strongly tied to the degree of value to which the candidate values the secrets. The very secrecy of the secrets are the source of this value. The difficulty and inaccessibility of the experience of being an initiate in

---

[126] Tantra: Urban, "Elitism," 6; Freemasonry: ibid., 10.
[127] Urban, "Elitism," 7.
[128] Urban, "Elitism", 23.
[129] Urban, "Elitism," 29.

these traditions as well as the rules of enforced secrecy serve to heighten the value of the contents of the secret and thus the value of the possessor of these contents.

Urban focuses on this nature of secrecy, the "adorning" quality of it, which he derives from a reading of Lamont Lindstrom, who in turn develops it from Pierre Bourdieu's notions of "symbolic capital."[130] In later writings, including his book, *Tantra: Sex*, *Secrecy, Politics and Power in the Study of Religion* (University of California Press, 2003), Urban expounds on this adorning quality stating that these adorning possessions (i.e. secrets) "[give] the owner of concealed knowledge […] the mark of social distinction or status."[131]

Because Urban finds these common features of secrecy in two very different religious traditions it seems worth testing whether or not these features fit in other traditions that scholars have identified as esoteric, for example Iamblichus's school as it is sketched out in the *DM*. To this end, I will examine in the following pages the specific features of Iamblichus where he intimates that there is a secret knowledge, existing solely in his group and that this knowledge confers a specific status on the group that in turn makes them the sole repository of truth. I argue that this is a very effective argumentative/apologetic strategy, an *argumentum ex mysterio*, that effectively neutralizes the ability of any other party to argue against it. The possession of social capital thus limits the ability of outsiders to engage with the author because he possesses a higher status and has access to pertinent knowledge that outsiders may not attain. He has in other words, asserted his authority "in terms that [augment his] claim to knowledge and expertise regarding sacrifice and other ritual actions that [establish] connections between the individual and the realm of the spirits."[132]

The remainder of this section and the following one attempt a textual analysis of certain passages in the *DM* that concern the role and function of secrecy. The following pages in this section interpret the passages in question to demonstrate the way in which Iamblichus uses the secret against outsiders to differentiate practices of his group from those of other groups and to simultaneously claim a vantage point on truth which he claims his group alone possesses.

In the next section, entitled Function of Secrecy Within a Group, I will similarly interpret the text but this time, I will look for evidence that suggests Iamblichus's use of secrecy as a

---

[130] Urban, "Elitism," 3.
[131] Urban, *Tantra*, 3.
[132] Marx-Wolf, "Ritual Experts," 483.

structuring scheme for in-group identity. It will thus be of special interest to examine the role of hierarchical understandings of secrecy.

Secrecy Aimed against Outsiders in the *De Mysteriis*

Iamblichus uses a number of different methods to distinguish his group of theurgists from outsiders. In his answers to the various questions of Porphyry, Iamblichus continually points out where Porphyry misunderstands, in Iamblichus's eyes at least, the basic foundation of theurgic method. While this is not clearly tied to the notion of a secret there are sufficient supporting examples that suggest that the excluding force of Iamblichus's argument lies somewhere in his group's possession of a secret knowledge.

The opening invocation to Hermes sets up the overall tone of the *DM*. Iamblichus calls upon Hermes, whom he calls "patron god of the priests" and "the one who presides over true knowledge about the gods." Iamblichus thus establishes from the start a connection to this god, to whom he says "our ancestors [he means the Egyptians] in particular dedicated the fruits of their wisdom, attributing all their own writings to Hermes." Hermes is called as a witness to the contents of the letter both as a traditional pious act, and as a means to assert the truth of what Iamblichus is about to say. By invoking the god and commenting on the particular ancestral connection that the Egyptians possessed with Hermes, Iamblichus asserts an authority to discourse over topics with which he implies Porphyry may not be familiar.[133] The key phrase here is "true knowledge" *alētheias epistēmēs*. The word "true" is repeated again and again throughout the *DM*, signifying its importance, as when Iamblichus writes in the next lines, "it is reasonable for me to grant you a true reply [*apokrinoumai soi auta talēthē*] to your enquiries." (*DM* 5)

Iamblichus's use of the word "true" twice indicates his wish to convey the notion that many of the problems Porphyry raises in his initial letter result from epistemological distortion and misunderstanding. Iamblichus, condescendingly offers to clarify these issues for Porphyry and offer some hints of explanation. However, this explanation has a totalizing force in that many of the examples which Porphyry raises and believes are legitimate examples of theurgic

[133] This is, of course, amusing, since Iamblichus and Porphyry actually share the same Syrian ethnic heritage, but in his persona as Abammon, Iamblichus is able to play a role through his pseudonym's heritage to ensure total control over the traditions he presents.

practice will be shown to be bastardized and thus not very useful as examples. In all cases, Iamblichus will maintain his hold over the truth, performing a violent act of hermeneutics that oppresses and objectifies all theurgy according to his particular worldview.

This is immediately apparent from the start of the letter where Iamblichus creates a taxonomy of Porphyry's questions. Some of these questions, he says, are theological and thus open to theological speculation. Others are philosophical and may be solved with philosophy. Still others, however, are theurgical and can only be solved theurgically (*theourgikōs*). (*DM* 11) The use of theurgic in such a strange setting calls attention to how Iamblichus tries to demonstrate the normal inaccessibility of the doctrines about which he writes. The theurgic method of interpretation is closed off from a public understanding, and, more importantly, the exact criteria of this method is defined within a closed system by Iamblichus himself. Should anyone attempt to argue with Iamblichus's philosophy by using his own terminology, they will be placed in a passive state, forced to accept the legitimacy of a doctrine whose evidence is available only in the experience of a few.

Iamblichus uses the occasion of Porphyry's letter, the presence of its questions, as an affirmation of his own group possessing a special access to theological and theurgical knowledge. In the opening passages, Iamblichus declares to Porphyry that he "[does] well in laying before the priests questions about theology, such as they love to deal with and which pertain to their expertise" (*DM* 5). If Porphyry's letter is meant to be read as a critique or attack on the philosophical inconsistencies in Iamblichus's system, then Iamblichus is very clever to turn this on its head and see the supposed attack of Porphyry as a sincere approach before a wise man seeking expert knowledge. This places Iamblichus in a clearly superior position. Later, Iamblichus will repeat this sentiment, but will circularly use it as an example of reductio ad absurdam. In the question at hand, Porphyry addresses the common Neoplatonic conception that the divine is a wholly immaterial force that does not associate with matter at all. Iamblichus notes that:

> This doctrine constitutes the ruination of sacred ritual and theurgical communion of gods with men, by banishing the presence of the higher classes of being outside the confines of the earth. For it amounts to nothing else but saying that the divine is set apart from the earthly realm, and…that this realm is bereft of divinity; and it follows, according to this reasoning, that not even we priests would have learned anything from the gods, and that you are wrong to interrogate us as if we had a special degree of knowledge, if in fact we differ in no way from other mortals. (*DM* 35-37)

For Iamblichus, this consequence is wholly contemptuous and not worth considering, since the reality of the priests's authority and distinct status from the rest of mortality is taken for granted and Porphryy apparently accedes to the truth of this as evinced by his having written a letter to the priests asking after their "special degree of knowledge."

There are specific instances where this "special degree of knowledge" serves as the main force of argument for Iamblichus. Replying to Porphyry's concerns that theurgy seems to coerce various divinities as though they were subject to passions, Iamblichus responds that "the question is asked out of an inexperience of sacred mystagogy. Of the works of theurgy performed on any given occasion, some have a cause that is secret and superior to all rational explanation…" (DM 47). The argument goes on to explain how theurgy often has a dual effect, working on both gods and human beings, and that theurgical procedures concerned with passion really have far more to do with excising passions out of human beings via catharsis. This argument itself is not so important to our purposes. What is important is to note that Iamblichus cites Porphyry's ignorance as the main factor that makes it difficult for Porphyry to comprehend the true function of theurgic practice. This time, he notes that some details of theurgic practice are simply secret, and thus incomprehensible to outsiders.

This sentiment is again expressed in the final paragraphs of Book I where Iamblichus reiterates that the seeming irrationality of the rituals that coerce the gods as if they have passions is easily explained. The gods originally gave these rituals in the form that the theurgists currently perform them.

> Was not this cult established by law at the beginning intellectually, according to the ordinances of the gods? It imitates the order of the gods, both the intelligible and that in the heavens. It possesses external measures of what truly exists and wondrous tokens, such as have been sent down hither by the creator and father of all, by means of which unutterable truths are expressed through secret symbols, beings beyond form brought under the control of form, things superior to all image reproduced through images, and all things brought to completion through one single divine cause, which itself so far transcends passions that reason is not even capable of grasping it… For humans, being incapable of attaining knowledge of these things by the aid of reasoning, but thinking that this is possible, are borne entirely outwards towards the human passions that are familiar to them, and on the basis of their own condition make conjectures about the gods. (*DM* 79-81)

What this means is that the precise details of theurgic practice are inherently tied up in a super-rational discourse, understandable only through secret symbols that when properly interpreted

indicate the otherwise hidden truth of Iamblichus's doctrines. Theurgic practice is problematic because it does capture unintelligible reality in symbols ("things superior to all image reproduced through images,") but Iamblichus argues that this is nonetheless legitimate because his particular method of utilizing the material to express the immaterial comes from a direct divine order "established…according to the ordinances of the gods."

There are other instances where Iamblichus establishes a distinction between true and false knowledge and where he intimates that the theurgists (his group) are the only ones who have true knowledge of religion. In response to the issue of whether or not theurgic ceremonies should be simple or complex, Iamblichus asserts that they should be complex in accordance with the multitude of divine powers that are awoken by the descent of the gods into reality, and he asserts that "Only the theurgists know these things exactly through having made trial of them in practice, then only these can know what is the proper method of performing the hieratic art." (*DM* 263) All the gods must be honored, and the evidence of this is only to be found among the theurgists. Iamblichus claims then that the truth can only be found among the theurgists and thus the necessary evidence to argue the case is inaccessible to Porphyry. The true philosophy, which only the theurgists possess, supports polytheism in spite of the fact, as Porphyry must have been hinting with his original question, Neoplatonic philosophy seems to support monotheism. This is a clear example of the appropriation of a tradition to support aims not in accordance with the original tradition, and it is accomplished by means of an assertion of secret knowledge.

While speaking about the proper protocol for receiving a mantic spirit in divination by possession, Iamblichus raises the counter example of a group that does not follow this protocol. He writes:

> But those who conjure up the spirits secretly, without these blessed visions, grope as it were, in darkness, and know nothing of what they do, except for some very small signs which appear in the body of the one divinely inspired, and some other signs that manifest themselves clearly; but they are ignorant of the whole of divine inspiration, which is hidden in obscurity. (*DM* 133)

The blessed visions Iamblichus refers to here are apparently visible apparitions of divine power, especially a "form of fire [that] is seen by the recipient before the reception; and sometimes…becomes conspicuous to all the spectators, during either the descent or the withdrawl of the god" in the rite of theurgic possession.(ibid.) Iamblichus thus notes a competing practice that seems to partake of elements of his theurgic tradition and is thus explainable within

his own discourse. Nonetheless, this practice is somehow flawed. Iamblichus points out that the chief attribute and limiting factor of this practice is the overall ignorance on the part of the participants who lack an understanding of the proper technique. Iamblichus describes the main features of the knowledge one would have to possess to attain an holistic understanding of the method. "Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to learn only these things, nor would someone knowing only these things become accomplished in the divine science. But it is also necessary to know what divine possession is, and how it happens." (*DM* 135) It is not necessary for our purposes to go into any greater detail about what these factors of divine possession are, but we should nonetheless note that Iamblichus once again asserts the value of a specific expert knowledge.

There is yet another example where Iamblichus criticizes people whom Porphyry suggests as having a semi-theurgic technique by pointing out that these pseudo-theurgists operate under a false conception of their actions. The people in question are diviners who stand on magical characters, apparently symbols drawn on the ground, and somehow from the powers of these signs prophesize the future. Iamblichus finds these people to be utterly contemptible. He notes that their technique is

> readily accessible and widespread among the vulgar throng, employing falsehood and deceit of an intolerable nature, enjoys the presence of no god, but produces a certain motion of the soul, contrary to the gods, and draws from them an indistinct and phantom-like appearance, which sometimes…is likely to be disturbed by evil daemonic forces. (*DM* 151-153)

Iamblichus's critique includes among other claims the assertion that this technique is easily accessible to the "vulgar throng." I would argue that Iamblichus is at pains here to show the supreme evil of this technique, because, in part, it is accessible to commoners, who ignore the procedures of theurgy which he apparently teaches in his school and which include "the order of sacred observances," "the endurance of toils,"and "the customs, prayers, and rituals." (*DM* 153) Clearly, the standing on characters share some feature in common with the theurgists (in fact, a little later, Iamblichus notes a legitimate way to use magical characters [*DM* 155-157). However, this adulterated practice does not follow the proper protocol of theurgy to warrant recognition.

Chapter 3: The Function of Secrecy Within a Group:

The claim to possession of secrets within a group contributes to group cohesion by strengthening the bonds of individual members to the group whose secrets tie the members to the structure of the group. In the previous chapter we saw how secrecy functioned to distinguish an insider group (the theurgists) from the outsiders. In this section I address the way in which secrecy continues to function even for those people who may be members of Iamblichus's group. Iamblichus continually points to instances where the very efficacy of theurgy depends to some extent on the practitioner not understanding what he is doing. This astonishingly paradoxical shift only indicates a new function of secrecy that often occurs within the dynamic of a group, namely the eternal delay of the content of the secret. This particular function of the secret serves to ensure the symbolic value of the secret and thus helps the secret maintain its status even among those who presumably are in-group members.

In his work more recent work on Freemasonry, Hugh Urban notes that there is a tendency in Freemasonry to treat the pursuit of lodge knowledge as an infinite progression, comparable to "peeling the layers of an [endless] onion." In Freemasonic initiations, the candidate is often informed that the meaning of the signs and symbols which he previously received in a lower level is in fact an intentional deception. This delay maintains the candidates frustration and keeps him in the pursuit of ever higher grades and ever deeper truths.[134]

Despite a few hints at a graded development of the individual through theurgic practice, there is little evidence in the *De Mysteriis* of an elaborate system of hierarchically structured mystical grades, such as there is in Freemasonry. Nonetheless, there is evidence that even the theurgists themselves could not comprehend the fully account of their own secrets.

In his discussion of theurgic union, Iamblichus notes that contra Plotinian views on *henosis*, intellectual contemplation is not sufficient to effect union with the gods. The argument aims to legitimize material offerings as a means to *henosis*, but Iamblichus's explanation of why this is the case is curious. "It is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union." (*DM* 115)

---

[134] Urban, "The Adornment of Silence," *Journal of Religion and Society* 3 (2001): 17.

Thus the act of theurgy is something understood ultimately not even by the theurgist himself. It is a process that is accomplished and understood solely by the gods. Iamblichus offers far earlier in the *DM* some explanation of why this might be when he writes:

> …if one were to consider also how the hieratic prayer-formulae have been sent down to mortals by the gods themselves, and that they are the symbols of the gods themselves, and not known to anyone but them, and that in a way they possess the same power as the gods themselves, how could one any longer believe that such supplication is derived from the sense world and is not divine and intellectual (*DM* 61)

As this passage seems to suggest, the passivity of the practitioner of theurgy is maintained even though he is performing an act, namely the recitation of prayer formula. The prayer formulae are incomprehensible things, not accessible to rational analysis,[135] secret, and thus function to heighten the participant's status during his apparent, but not actual, use of them. If anything, the symbols use the practitioner, permitting him to function as a conduit for their meaning, which can only be expressed through the action of ritual. This passivity is necessary in Iamblichus's overall system because it preserves the divine character of the act and saves the theurgist from the possible criticism that his activity merely stirs up and excites the sensory world in some respect as opposed to the divine. In this way then, the philosophy of Neoplatonism, with its insistence on an impassive god, plays an important role in dictating the secretive or incomprehensible, nature of theurgic rites. This reading is further maintained in other passages in the *DM*.

> …one would not rightly suppose that divine possession belongs to the soul or one of its faculties, or to intellect or one of its faculties or activities, or to bodily weakness or its absence. Nor would one reasonably suppose that it would occur in this way, for being transported by a god is neither a human accomplishment, nor does it base it spower in human parts (of the body) or activities. But, on the one hand, these are otherwise subordinate, and the god uses them as instruments; on the other hand, the entire activity of divination comes to its fulfillment through the god acting by himself, purely detached from other things, without the soul or body moving in any way (DM 135)

[135] Compare this to Iamblichus's discussion on the investigation of divine names. Sometimes names of various deities can be subjected to grammatical analysis, sometimes they cannot. However, even in the cases where these names can be analyzed and some truth drawn from this analysis, ultimately it has very little bearing, and the real truth remains within the use of the name in a ritual context: "But as for those names of which we have acquired a scientific analysis, through these we have a knowledge of divine being, and power, and order, all in a name! And, moreover, we preserve in their entirety the mystical and arcane images of the gods in our soul; and we reaise our soul up through these towards the gods and, as far as it is possible, when it has been elevated, we experience union with the gods." (*DM* 297)

In one passage, Iamblichus seems to be even self-aware of this difficulty in theurgic practice; that theurgy would seem to simultaneously rely on a passivity of the practitioner, but it also depends upon the proper performance of a complicated series of acts.

> There is another explanation that one might give of this and that is the following: the whole of theurgy presents a double aspect. On the one hand, it is performed by men, and as such observes our natural rank in the universe; but on the other, it controls divine symbols, and in virtue of them is raised up to a union with the higher powers, and directs itself harmoniously in accordance with their dispensation, which enables it quite properly to assume the mantle of the gods. It is in virtue of this distinction then, that the art both naturally invokes the powers from the universe as superiors, inasmuch as the invoker is a man, and yet on the other hand (DM 207)

It would be saying too much to say that Iamblichus recognizes the dual force of the secret such as I have attempted to demonstrate here, but rather it would seem that his own logical understanding of how theurgy works makes this paradox necessary and this logic coincidentally fits the model of secrecy presented here quite well.

Conclusion:

This essay has sought to tease out the functional aspects of secrecy in Late Antiquity. I have argued that secrecy has both preservative and generative aspects. The case study has been the Neoplatonic system of Iamblichus. Iamblichus's system hypothesizes a particular worldview wherein one's value is determined by the level of knowledge one possesses, not unlike modern examples of secrecy retention (e.g. the CIA) and the relationships of various other religions towards the notion of secrecy (e.g. Hugh Urban's notion of secrecy in Tantra and Freemasonry).

The sources of evidence of Iamblichus's school are sparse, and much of this essay has depended on guessing at structures on the basis of fragmentary descriptions of ideal philosophical schools which are then substantiated through scholarly reconstructions of the contemporary religious landscape in the fourth century. To these reconstructions, I have added my own and others' ruminations on the general ubiquity of secrecy throughout various other institutions (religious and secular) and sought to explain how secrecy exists solely as a social phenomenon. Nature has no secrets without human beings identifying them as such and perceiving in that secrecy a challenge: learn. Secrecy can be defined as a circular relationship between epistemology and socially contextualizing factors, and, like all circular relationships, it remains unclear which came first.

Regardless, it is clear enough that the two forces are mutually reinforcing. Secrecy preserves an elite status within a particular social system. This status depends upon an interpretation of truth as being private and localized among a few individuals. The exact reasons for this secrecy and exclusion vary and may be due to some revealed knowledge (especially in the case of religions), social status, or other such factors.

It has further been argued that secrecy exists at both insider and outsider levels. At the level of the outsider, secrecy serves as a form of symbolic capital, a prestige value with which figures external to the group are attracted and coerced to join. Secrets at the inner level however, function much the same way, but have a different audience. Secrets at this level preach to the convinced. They establish the same relationship of superiority for the possessor of the secret, but at the insider level, they contribute to the generation of the very philosophy in question. The secret becomes the reason for staying in the group, as it is never fully revealed, and its revelation stands to occur at the next stage or level in the assumption of the group identity. This in turn necessitates the presence always of another level, which generates, especially for the

Neoplatonists the *via negativa* of their philosophy. The philosophy or revelation can never be fully explained within a secretive group, for it diminishes the very value of the secret which initially brought the members to the group in the first place.

It must be acknowledged that this analysis of secrecy is heavily impaired by the paucity and difficulty of source material. The only document considered here has been Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis*, and it is certainly possible that Iamblichus really did have some kind of secret theoretical understanding of the universe that explained things better than other Neoplatonists. We have hints of this theology, but we also have consistent inferences that much of Iamblichus's epistemology depends on some kind of experiential/demonstrable proof, which is only accessible to those who already believe in its efficacy and who have practiced for a long time to reach a level of perfection.

In reading these practices back into the context of Late Antiquity, we can see that Iamblichus definitely had an understanding of his group as separate from other groups that nonetheless possessed similar features. He therefore had a motivation, in light of the intense ferment of struggles in Late Antiquity, to present his tradition in such a way as to reaffirm the value of his own group. The intent in this paper has been to isolate secrecy as a useful point of departure for an understanding of Iamblichus's attempt at generating symbolic capital for his group and thereby augmenting the prestige of his group.

Works Consulted

Ahbel-Rappe, Sara. *Socrates: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2002.

Ando, Clifford. "Pagan Apologetics and Christian Intolerance in the Ages of Themistius and Augustine." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1996): 171-207.

Armstrong, A. "Was Plotinus a Magician?" *Phronesis* 1, no. 1 (1955): 73-79.

Athanassiadi, Polymnia. "Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus." *Journal of Roman Studies* Vol. 83 (1993): 115-130.

---. "Canonizing Platonism: The Fetters of Iamblichus." In *Canon and Canonicity: The Formation and Use of Scripture*, edited by Einar Thomassen, 127-141. Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010.

Augustine. *City of God.* Translated by Henry Bettenson. Penguin Books, 1984.

Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price. *Religions of Rome Volume 1*: *A History*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of* Practice. Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Chuvin, Pierre. *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*. Translated by B.A. Archer. Harvard University Press, 1990.

Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Dillon, John M. "Iamblichus of Chalcis." *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* part 2, vol. 36.2, edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase, 863-878. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987.

Dodds, E.R. "Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947): 55-69.

---. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. University of Berkley Press, 1951.

Dorandi, Tiziano. "Organization and Structure of Hellenistic Schools." In *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, edited by Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield, 55-62. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Edwards, Mark. *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students*. Liverpool University Press, 2000.

Eunapius. *Lives of the Philosophers*. Translated by Wilmer C. Wright. Loeb Classical Library 134. Harvard University Press, 2005.

Farganis, *Readings in Social Theory* 2nd ed. McGraw-Hill, 1996.

Finamore, John F. *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul*. American Classical Studies 14. Chico: Sholars Press, 1985.

Foucault, Michel.

Fowden, Garth. "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 33-59.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, 1973.

Iamblichus. *De Mysteriis*. Translated and commented by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell. Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

Janowitz, Naomi. *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity*. Magic in History. Pennsylviana State University Press, 2002.

"Julianus." Suda Online. Translated by Catherine Roth. http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/iota/433.

---. Suda Online. Translated by Catherin Roth. http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/iota/434.

Kirschner, Robert. "The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity." *Vigiliae Christianae* 38, no. 2 (1984): 105-124.

Lewy, Hans. *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*. Etudes Augustiniennes, 1978.

Lynch. J.P. *Aristotle's School*. University of California Press, 1972.

Marx-Wolf, Heidi. "High Priests of the Highest God: Third-Century Platonists as Ritual Experts." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 4 (2010): 481-513.

Merlan, Philip. "Religion and Philosophy from Plato's Phaedo to the Chaldean Oracles." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 1 no. 2 (1963): 163-176.

Meyer, Marvin, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*: *The International Edition*. HarperOne, 2007.

Oliver, James H. "The Diadoche at Athens under the Humanistic Emperors." *The American Journal of Philology* 98, no. 2 (1977): 160-178.

O'Meara, Dominic. *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Plato. *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

Riedweg, Christopher. *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Cornell University, 2005.

Scott, Alan B. "Churches or Books? Sethian Social Organization." *Journal of Early Christian*

Studies 3, no. 2 (1995): 109-122.

Schuddeboom, Feyo L. *Greek Religious Terminology---Telete & Orgia*. Brill, 2009.

Shaw, Gregory. *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

Sheppard, Anne. "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy." *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series 32, no. 1 (1982): 212-224.

Sorabji, Richard (ed.) *The Philosophy of the Commentators 200-600 AD Volume I*: *Psychology*. Duckworth, 2004.

Spanoudakis, Konstantinos. "Eusebius *C. Hier*. 6.5 on Man and Fowl: An Instance of Christian-Pagan Dialogue on a Theurgic Ritual." *Vigiliae Christianae* 64 (2010): 31-53.

Stark, Rodney. "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science." *Review of Religious Research* 43, no. 2 (2001): 101-120.

Tefft, Stanton K. *Secrecy*: *A Cross Cultural Perspective*. New York: Human Sciences Press, 1980.

Urban, Hugh B. "Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry." *Numen* 44, no. 1 (1997): 1-38.

---. "The Adornment of Silence: Secrecy and Symbolic Power in American Freemasonry." *Journal of Religion and Society* 3 (2001): 1-29.

Wallis, R.T. *Neoplatonism*. Duckworth, 1972.

--- (ed.) *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*. International Society for Neoplatonic Studies. State University of New York, 1992.

Watts, Edward. "The Student Self in Late Antiquity." In *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, edited by David Brakke, Michael L. Satlow, and Steven Weitzman, 234-251. Indiana University Press, 2005.

---. *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*. University of California Press, 2006.

Young, France M. "Towards a Christian Paideia." In *The Cambridge History of Christianity Vol. 1: Origins to Constantine*, edited by Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young, 485-500. Cambridge University Press, 2006.