Esotericism and the Scholastic Imagination:
The Origins of Esoteric Practice in Christian Kataphatic Spirituality[*]

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Abstract

Scholars agree that the imagination is central to esoteric practice. While the esoteric *vis imaginativa* is usually attributed to the influx of Neoplatonism in the Italian Renaissance, this article argues that many of its key properties were already in place in medieval scholasticism. Two aspects of the history of the imagination are discussed. First, it is argued that esoteric practice is rooted in a broader kataphatic trend within Christian spirituality that explodes in the popular devotion literature of the later Middle Ages. By looking at the role of Bonaventure's "cognitive theology" in the popularization of gospel meditations and kataphatic devotional prayer, it is argued that there is a direct link between the scholastic reconsideration of the imaginative faculty and the development of esoteric practices inspired by Christian devotional literature. Secondly, it is argued that the Aristotelian inner sense tradition of the scholastics left a lasting impression on later esoteric conceptualizations of the imaginative faculty. Examples suggesting evidence for both these two claims are discussed. The article proposes to view esoteric practices as an integral part of a broader kataphatic stream in European religious history, separated out by a set of disjunctive strategies rooted in the policing of "orthopraxy" by ecclesiastical authorities.

Keywords

Imagination; kataphatic practice; scholasticism; the inner senses; illumination; heteropraxy

1. Introduction: Contextualizing Esoteric Practice

Recent scholarship in the field of esotericism has sought to demonstrate that the currents we now class as "esoteric" have, historically, been integral parts of the religious, philosophical, and scientific cultures of Europe.[1] This revisionist work has primarily focused on ideas and doctrinal systems, sometimes in combination with the institutional affiliations and social standing that "learned men" writing on esoteric topics enjoyed in their own lifetimes.[2] What has generally been lacking is a focus on practice.[3] In this article I aim to show how esoteric practices can shed additional light on how esotericism has come to be differentiated from categories such as "religion" or "Christianity". My main focus shall, however, be on the underlying continuities between esoteric and mainstream practices that tend to get hidden from view by these disjunctions.

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[1]   See especially Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity," *Aries* 1, no. 1 (2001): 5–37; Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, "Esoterik und Christentum vor 1800: Prolegomena zu einer Bestimmung ihrer Differenz," *Aries* 3, no. 2 (2003): 127–65; Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 34 (2005): 78–97; von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

[2]   In addition to the programmatic works mentioned in footnote 1, numerous empirical and theoretical studies of this kind focusing on esotericism and the Enlightenment are found in the two volumes Neugebauer-Wölk, with Andre Rudolph (eds.), *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Rezeption – Integration – Konfrontation* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2008); Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth, and Markus Meumann (eds.), *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne* (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2013). See also Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2014); Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).

[3]   This appears to be an overall hiatus in esotericism scholarship, especially in work focusing on the early modern period. Exceptions are mainly found in some of the studies of modern initiatory and magical groups, notably Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). On the neglect of practice, see also Amy Hale, "Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs. Esoteric Studies," The Pomegranate 15, no. 1–2 (2013): 151–63. The prominent inclusion of "practice" in Hanegraaff's recent introduction to the field is a promising sign that this neglect is about to be remedied. See Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 102–18.

In the course of the article I will develop and defend two hypotheses: (1) that an important context for esoteric practices is found in the popular affective piety movement of the later Middle Ages, grounded in theological developments that emphasized the power of the imagination; and (2) that the fusion of an Aristotelian psychological tradition with a Neoplatonic epistemology which played out in high scholasticism prefigures the understanding of "imagination" and associated practices in later esoteric sources. While sections 2 to 4 below establish the necessary historical and conceptual background, I will assess both hypotheses in detail in section 5.

I define "practice" broadly, as any activity that is performed regularly and in a patterned way.[4] "Esoteric" practices – by which I simply mean "practices that have later been labelled 'esoteric'"[5] – are typically concerned with a search for higher knowledge, or gnosis, and in so doing they tend to emphasize the use of the imagination. Based on this commonplace observation, I argue that esoteric practices typically make use of kataphatic, or imagery-based techniques, as opposed to apophatic techniques, which repress imagery. While the connection between esotericism and imagination is old hat,[6] esotericism scholars have typically invoked imagination in order to set "esotericism" aside as something distinctive and different from other, presumably "unimaginative" cultural trends. For example, Faivre's influential model presents the esoteric "form of thought" as the "radical counterpart of Enlightenment ideology" – where "imagination/mediation" stands in contrast to "monism/materialism".[7]

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[4]   My understanding of practice is in the tradition of Bourdieu, but drawing more specifically on the notion of "patterned practices" developed from that foundation in Anders Roepstorff, J. Niewöhner, and S. Beck, "Enculturing brains through patterned practices," *Neural Networks*, 23, no. 8–9 (2010). Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[5]   To avoid unnecessarily encumbering the language, and at the peril of obscuring the thoroughly constructionist assumptions that are implied throughout, I nevertheless take the liberty to use "esoteric practices" as a short-hand phrase.

[6]   E.g., as perhaps the most central characteristic in Antoine Faivre's seminal definition of esotericism as a "form of thought." See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 12-13; see also Faivre, "*Vis imaginativa*: A Study of Some Aspects of the Imagination and Its Mythical Foundations," in *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). Cf. the substantial entry on the subject by Marieke van den Doel and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Imagination," *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

[7]   As recently pointed out by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 3 (2015): 80.

Rather than assuming this dichotomy, my argument is quite the opposite. The "esoteric" use of imagery-based techniques is part of a much broader orientation toward kataphatic spirituality, and individual practices should therefore be viewed as leaves on a major branch of European intellectual and religious history. In particular, I will argue that esotericism is aligned with a key trend in late-medieval theories of cognition, and with the devotional practices that it inspired among monastic orders and the laity alike.[8]

Connecting esoteric kataphatic practice with the conceptual history of the imagination also leads to other insights that break somewhat with the standard narrative. While the received view is that esotericism's emphasis on the imagination is linked with the Neoplatonism and Hermeticism of the Renaissance humanists, the story that I will tell is one in which esotericism owes a great deal more to medieval high scholasticism. This, I shall argue, has three discernible consequences for the way we characterize the history of esotericism: it switches our focus of interest from Platonism to Aristotelianism; it extends the historical scope backwards to the Middle Ages, and especially to monasticism, scholasticism, and the emergence of popular piety based on scholastic theories of the imagination; and it emphasizes the need to consider the Islamicate contexts of core ideas.

2. The Kataphatic–Apophatic Distinction: Its Relation to "Esoteric Practice" and the Attainment of "Gnosis"

The distinction between kataphatic (*kataphasis*, "affirmation") and apophatic (from *apophēmi*, "to deny") has a long history in Christian theology. Most often it is used to distinguish the two opposing theological strategies of *via negativa* (apophatic) and *via positiva* (kataphatic). In this sense, the distinction can at least

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8   For medieval cognitive theories see especially Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Pasnau, however, admits to a selective reading that focuses only on what he (a philosopher) considers "the most impressive and coherent statement" of the period's cognitive theories, along with "the most interesting and innovative challenge to that theory" (Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, vii), and as a result he does not have much to say about the place of the imaginative faculty. On that topic, see Deborah Black, "Imagination and Estimation: Arabic Paradigms and Western Transformations," *Topoi* 19, no. 1 (2000): 59–75. On the impact of these novel theories of imagination on contemplative and devotional practice, see especially Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2011).

be traced back to Pseudo-Dionysius (largely following Proclus).[9] However, the pair has also had a systematic application in the study of "mysticism", where they refer to two separate experiential approaches that, to some extent, mirror the theological distinction.[10] "Apophatic" mysticism refers to a comprehension without words, beyond sensation and imagery, logic and reason – usually connected to claims of "transcendent" and "ineffable" knowledge. By contrast, the kataphatic mystic attains positive, graspable visions of the divine; seeing the face of God, walking in heavenly palaces, or receiving divine knowledge from conversations with the angels or the saints are examples of kataphatic experience in this sense.

Both the theological and the mystical understanding of these terms tend to focus on religious elites and virtuosi, but this bias is not inherent in or necessitated by the concepts themselves. More recently, the kataphatic/apophatic distinction has been generalized in order to pick out a basic difference in contemplative techniques, whether in meditation, prayer, or devotion.[11] As such, the two terms cover distinct types of practice that imply differences in how people apply their minds and bodies. Kataphatic practice works actively with mental and physical imagery, words, music, and emotion, engaging the sensorium in order to inspire a touch of divinity. Apophatic practice, in contrast, turns away from the senses and the outside world, seeking to empty the mind of content and obliterate the self in pursuit of a divinity beyond attributes. Rendered in these general terms, the kataphatic-apophatic distinction can serve as a *tertium comparationis* for religious practices the world over.[12] We find both types exemplified among mainstream and establishment institutions in the Christian west, although there is a clear preference for the kataphatic type. Monastic hesychasm, medieval "quietism", and the contemporary "Centering Prayer" movement[13] are examples of Christian

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9　　See Andrew Louth, "Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, edited by Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 140.

10　　E.g. Egan, "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticisms."

11　　See e.g. Tanya M. Luhrmann and Rachel Morgain, "Prayer as Inner Sense Cultivation: An Attentional Learning Theory of Spiritual Experience," *Ethos* 40, no. 4 (2012); Luhrmann, Howard Nusbaum, and Ronald Thisted, "'Lord, Teach Us to Pray': Prayer Practice Affects Cognitive Processing,' *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 13 (2013).

12　　In a separate paper, I develop a theoretical framework for kataphatic practice that grounds it thoroughly in biological and cognitive processes that are shared across the species. See Egil Asprem, "Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (forthcoming).

13　　The Centering Prayer movement was started by a group of American Cistercians in the

practices tending in the apophatic direction, while gospel meditations, the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola, and contemporary Charismatic prayer practices are examples of the kataphatic trend.[14] It is notable that church authorities, especially the Roman Catholic, have tended to view the apophatic type as more problematic than the kataphatic one, as illustrated for example by the condemnation of Miguel de Molinos's quietism as a heresy in 1687.[15] This picture is, of course, complicated by the splintering and pluralization of religious authority that followed from the Reformation – with some Protestant new religious movements, like the Quakers, even building their orthopraxy on broadly apophatic foundations. With this in mind, the kataphatic-apophatic distinction can even be viewed as a practical and experiential aspect of the wider problem of mediation that has structured so much of the Catholic/ Protestant polemic. In fact, we might hypothesize that while apophatic practice has been problematic from the perspective of Catholic authorities, kataphatic practices tend to become more problematic among Protestant ones.

However this may be, my present claim is that key practices that we now associate with Western esotericism have historically been related to the kataphatic trend that has been dominant in Catholic spirituality especially. Practices such as the medieval *ars notoria* and related operations focused on conversation with angels and attainment of divine knowledge,[16] the Renaissance animation of statues,[17] the "enthusiasm" of Christian theosophy,[18] or the "clairvoyant" reading of the "Akashic records" in modern occultism[19] all stand in continuum with mainstream Christian practices focused on developing the "inner senses".[20]

1970s, prompted by the massive interest in, and increasing supply of, Buddhist contemplative traditions. It has since spread rapidly in Christian communities across denominations. For an insider account, see Pennington, *Centering Prayer.*

[14]   See Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back.*

[15]   See Innocent XI, "Condemning the Errors of Miguel de Molinos [Coelestis Pastor]," issued November 20, 1687, *Papal Encyclicas Online*, url: http://www.papalencyclicals.net/ Innoc11/i11coel.htm (accessed April 17, 2016).

[16]   See e.g. Claire Fanger (ed.), *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

[17]   See Hanegraaff, "Sympathy or the Devil: Renaissance Magic and the Ambivalence of Idols," *Esoterica* 2 (2000).

[18]   See e.g. Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Arthur Versluis, *Wisdom's Children: A Christian Esoteric Tradition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[19]   Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), 415–53.

[20]   See discussions of the Christian preoccupation with "sensing" and "perceiving" the divine

From theurgy to past-life regression, accessing higher knowledge through internal mental imagery is everywhere in esoteric experiential practices.[21]

The claim that the imagination is central to esotericism is certainly not new; most scholarly definitions recognize it.[22] Antoine Faivre has even suggested that the use of imagination is what demarcates "esotericism" from "mysticism":

> we could say that the mystic – in the strictly classical sense – aspires to the more or less complete suppression of images and intermediaries because for him they become obstacles to the union with God. While the esoterist appears to take more interest in the intermediaries revealed to his inner eye through the power of his creative imagination than to extend himself essentially toward the union with the divine. He prefers to sojourn on Jacob's ladder where angels (and doubtless other entities as well) climb up and down, rather than to climb to the top and beyond.[23]

I suggest that Faivre's important distinction between an orientation towards imagery and intermediaries on the one hand, and radical transcendence on the other, is more appropriately expressed by the kataphatic–apophatic distinction.[24] This allows us to say that the currents we tend to class as esoteric display an *orientation* towards the kataphatic stream, while not denying that apophatic elements are also found.

The more nuanced picture of kataphatic and apophatic tendencies is handy when we consider the problem of "gnosis". Virtually all scholars of esotericism emphasize that practices focus on the attainment of some special knowledge, and "gnosis" is the most common short-hand for this core aspect.[25] However, it is not always clear how the notion of gnosis maps on to the kataphatic, imagination-based character of esoteric practice. The

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compiled in the recent volume by Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (eds.), *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[21]   For practices of the imagination as a longue durée of Western ritual magic, see Christopher A. Plaisance, "Magic Made Modern? Re-evaluating the Novelty of the Golden Dawn's Magic," *Correspondences* 2, no. 2 (2014): 165–74.

[22]   Most notably in Faivre's influential definition, and in definitions relying on Henry Corbin's notion of *mundus imaginalis*; but we also find it as an element in von Stuckrad's discursive definition (in the guise of "mediation"). For the latter, see von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 34 (2005).

[23]   Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 12.

[24]   For a critique of attempts to distinguish "mysticism" from "esotericism" in terms like these, see von Stuckrad, "Mysticism, Gnosticism, and Esotericism as Entangled Discourses," 313–15.

[25]   See Asprem, "Reverse-Engineering 'Esotericism': How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 168–74.

most influential attempt to define gnosis as a technical category does so in *apophatic* terms. Hanegraaff uses the two dimensions of communicability and verifiability (or: language and the senses) to differentiate "gnosis", "reason", and "faith" as three separate approaches to knowledge. Set up in these terms, gnosis comes out as characteristically apophatic: the claim is of an unmediated, direct, ineffable knowledge of higher realities, which goes beyond sensation, reason, and discursive language.[26] By contrast, both "reason" and "faith" refer to knowledge claims that have a positive, discursively communicable and intelligible content – with "reason" additionally seeking to ground this content in sense data and logical argument. Somewhat counterintuitively, then, kataphatic practices appear closer to a "rational" than a "gnostic" or "faith-based" strategy: the idea is that the practitioner can follow certain specified techniques in order to evoke concrete and specific imagery in the mind (or even in the external perceptual field). Moreover, such practices will usually deploy a rigorous system of *discernment* in order to "test" the content and determine that it is good.[27] The road to esoteric knowledge through kataphatic visions typically involves language, imagery, and a form of empirical testing – albeit of "internal" rather than "external" sensations – through comparison of what has been seen, heard, or felt with official criteria or examples of what ought to be experienced under these circumstances.

Again, this is not to say that esoteric spokespersons never promise or report moments of pure apophatic insight. However, when they are present, apophatic elements of the "gnostic" type (*sensu* Hanegraaff) are typically related to the *goal of attainment* rather than the *path of practice*. I hold that we can view "esoteric practices" as what Ann Taves calls "composite ascriptions", where special actions are tied to special goals (ACTION → GOAL).[28] On this view, my focus in the present article is on actions rather than goals: Even if the goal

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[26]   E.g. Hanegraaff, "Reason, Faith, and Gnosis: Potentials and Problematics of a Typological Construct," in Peter Meusburger, Michael Welker, Edgar Wunder (eds.), *Clashes of Knowledge: Orthodoxies and Heterodoxies in Science and Religion* (Klaus Tschira Stiftung / Springer, 2008), 133–44.
[27]   Thus, the key esoteric strategy has been characterized as a form of "extended" or "unbounded" reason. See the extensive discussion in Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 431–41.
[28]   Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 46–48. Please note that this apparently simple concept presupposes a whole context of attribution theory, which studies how people attribute meanings, significance, agency, and causal power to things and events. *Composite* ascriptions combine any number of *simple* ascriptions (things/events deemed significant) into chains of goal-directed actions (practices). Thus, "special techniques" are used to achieve "special goals."

may in some cases be expressed in apophatic terms, we see a preference for image-oriented *techniques* in order to achieve the goals.

We find examples of this composite structure across the history of esoteric practice. For example, in the theurgic context of Renaissance Neoplatonism (Ficino) and Hermeticism (Lazzarelli), kataphatic, imagery-based techniques precede the promised apophatic "revelatory event".[29] The same is true in modern occultism, where both magically and theosophically oriented practices emphasize development of imagery as the path of practice, while holding up some ineffable experience of transcendent insight as the ultimate goal.[30] Complicating the picture, however, there are also examples of apophatic *practices* being mixed with the kataphatic ones. For example, Cornelius Agrippa spends most of the third book of *De occulta philosophia* talking about ritual practices that rely heavily on the support of sensory stimuli, symbolic mediation, and sensory engagement with spirits, yet he also includes (in chapter 55) an entry on the final "ascent of the mind" to "pure intellect" via abstinence, fasting, chastity, solitude, and tranquillity. Nevertheless, even in this case the practitioner would be expected to have already practiced kataphatic techniques before setting out on the apophatic journey to pure intellect. What is more, this progression would make perfect sense from the background of medieval theories of the imagination and mental imagery.

3. The Imaginative Faculty: Scholastic Faculty Psychology and the Aristotelian Renaissance

What we today call the imagination is one thing – how practitioners might have conceived of mental imagery is quite another.[31] Previous scholarship on

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[29] On this, see the rich and suggestive analysis in Hanegraaff, "Sympathy or the Devil."

[30] See for example the comparison of Rudolf Steiner's "Dweller on the Threshold" experience and Aleister Crowley's "Holy Guardian Angel" experience in Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 531–33.

[31] To make matters even more complicated, there is no single and unambiguous definition of imagination in contemporary psychology or cognitive science. Here, I will assume that we are talking about the phenomenon of mental imagery, which has a big body of research connected to it – including studies on the cultivation of mental imagery, individual differences in reported imagery vividness, and various factors that influence it. I address this literature and its importance for understanding esoteric practices from a cognitive angle in Asprem, "Explaining the Esoteric Imagination." For the concept of mental imagery cultivation, see Richard Noll, "Mental Imagery Cultivation as a Cultural Phenomenon: The Role of Visions in Shamanism," *Current Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (1985). For an overview of psychological and neurocognitive research on mental imagery as a separate type of mental representations, see

esotericism and "the imagination" has typically not made it sufficiently clear whether "imagination" is a part of actors' categories for explaining their own actions and experiences (that is, employed as an *emic* term), or whether it is used as a scholarly (etic) construct for the sake of analyzing the sources. In other words, it often remains unclear whether these analyses are drawing on contemporary theories of the imagination in order to shed light on historical phenomena, or whether they are engaged in excavating various historical meanings, theories, and practices that the actors themselves have attributed to "imagination". One would be a form of cognitive historiography, the other a genealogy of the imagination. Both approaches can be valuable, but they are separate projects that must be distinguished carefully.

By and large, historians of esotericism appear to have started from contemporary understandings of the imagination, interpreting any practice that shows evidence of mental imagery as an exercise of "imagination". Although it is usually not clear which psychological theory of imagination underpins these analyses, the frequent reference to terms such as "creative" and "active imagination" – terms associated with the heritage of Romanticism and even more specifically with the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung – justifies the suspicion that esotericism scholars are working from a vaguely Jungian conception, forged in the countercultural fervour of the Eranos meetings and imported into the study of esotericism by Faivre, via Henry Corbin.[32] Essentially, it is the imagination of the romantics that is projected backwards in time: a conception of free and creative mental imagery as a contrast with, and escape from, the cold, rational, and scientific intellect or reason.[33]

This, however, is a thoroughly modern contrast that is quite alien to key esoteric sources. With the failure to make sufficiently clear that the concept of "imagination" is not so much "discovered" in the sources as derived from the scholar's own vocabulary, we may also have missed out on the emic cognitive theories that underpinned these practices. This section is a modest attempt at

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Stephen M. Kosslyn, William L. Thompson, and Giorgio Ganis, *The Case for Mental Imagery* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). A much more detailed account of the relevant literature can be found in my separate paper cited above.

[32]   On the Eranos meetings, see especially Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013); on the influence of Eranos on an earlier generation of the study of esotericism, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277–314.

[33]   For a great analysis of the romantic bias of Faivre's notion in particular, see Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," 77–80. For a historical overview of the development of the romantic imagination from Enlightenment forbears, see James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

mapping some of this neglected territory.

My claim is that intellectual developments of the later Middle Ages left a permanent mark on esoteric conceptions of mental imagery.[34] This period saw an explosive interest in sophisticated theories of cognition, which would eventually influence devotional practice and piety on a broad scale.[35] Over the course of about a century (c. 1250 to 1350), scholastics like Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Henry of Ghent, Peter John Olivi, and William Ockham discussed the architecture of the human mind in great detail, developing an elaborate discourse on the philosophy of mind and mental function. There were many facets to these debates, and scholars were divided on a number of different grounds.[36] However, one of the issues at stake concerned the nature and function of mental imagery: where does it come from, how is it related to the faculty of "imagination", and how does that faculty relate to the acquisition of knowledge (*scientia*) and understanding (*sapientia*)?

The early thirteenth century saw the importation from the Islamic world of the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, which included a rich commentary tradition in Arabic.[37] This literature, and especially the commentaries of Avicenna and Averroes, sparked a burst of scholarly creativity. For our purposes, the commentaries to *De anima* – itself previously unavailable in Latin – are of particular interest.[38] The Persian scholar Avicenna (980–1037), writing already in the eleventh century, is the foremost authority, backing up his elaborations on *De anima* and its Greek commentary tradition with a sophisticated knowledge of the anatomy of the human brain, which matched that of Galen and would go unrivalled until the days of Vesalius.[39] Avicenna's works, together with those of Averroes (1126–1198), who had considerable differences with Avicenna that Latin scholars did not always identify, laid the foundation of a complex view of the faculties or "inner senses" that would resonate throughout medieval Europe.

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[34] Please note that I distinguish between "mental imagery" and "imagination." This is because, as we shall see, "mental imagery" is not always ascribed solely to imagination in these sources, and imagination is not solely about the formation of mental imagery.

[35] See especially Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*.

[36] A great overview with references to the major literature is available in Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[37] See Deborah L. Black, "Imagination and Estimation: Arabic Paradigms and Western Transformations," *Topoi* 19, no. 1 (2000): 59–75.

[38] For a close reading of the reception of *De anima* among Latin authors, see now Sander de Boer, *The Science of the Soul: The Commentary Tradition on Aristotle's De Anima, c. 1260–1360* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013).

[39] Christopher D. Green, "Where Did the Ventricular Localization of Mental Faculties Come From?" *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2003): 131–42.

3.1 A brief overview of the inner senses: Avicenna

The basic idea of cognition following Aristotle is one in which information about the world imprints itself on the five external senses, and passes from there into a number of inner senses or faculties that are specialized in extracting further information from this stream.[40] In *De anima*, the "common sense" combines the separate sense modalities into one coherent picture. The medieval discussion of the inner senses emerged from attempts to elaborate on Aristotle's "common sense", "memory", and especially his murky comments on "imagination". Avicenna's is a particularly influential and lucid attempt to do this, which set the stage for much of the later discussion both in the Muslim and the Christian world. Avicenna operates with five internal senses, to which are added a "cogitative faculty" that is dependent on the divinely endowed "intellect".[41] Below is a list of the faculties and their functions according to Avicenna:[42]

Faculty	Function
Common sense	Receives sensible forms from the five external senses
Formative/retentive imagination	Retains the forms in images
Estimative faculty	Receives/makes judgments about intentions (of externally sensed objects)
Memorative faculty	Stores images and intentions
Compositive imagination	Composes and divides forms and intentions
Cogitative faculty	The compositive imagination under the voluntary control of the intellect – i.e., controlled compositive imagining.

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[40] For a classic, although somewhat dated, treatment of the inner sense tradition following Aristotle, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, "The Internal Senses in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew Philosophical Texts," *The Harvard Theological Review* 28, no. 2 (1935).

[41] As Black explains, Avicenna appears to say that the compositive imagination can be controlled either by estimation or by reason, and that this gives rise to two separate "aspects." Thus, he is able to multiply the number of cognitive functions while restricting the number of inner senses to five. See Black, "Imagination and Estimation," 60.

[42] Avicenna's psychological theory is developed in two different works, *Al-Shifa* ("Healing") and *Al-Najah* ("Deliverance"). The parts of these works that deal with psychology are available in English translation in Fazlur Rahman, *Avicenna's "De anima," Being the Psychological Part of Kirab al-Shifa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), and idem, *Avicenna's Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

What is notable here is that Avicenna operates with two distinct imaginative faculties: the "formative/retentive" and the "compositive". The formative/retentive imagination accounts for our ability to retain a mental picture (image) of the forms that are received from the external senses (and combined by the *sensus communis*). These formal images are passed on to the "estimative" faculty, which is a specialized sense for detecting the *intentions* that go together with perceptible objects but are not themselves directly available to the external senses. While Avicenna is ambiguous about what counts as an intention, the examples he uses are typically about the affective states and motivations of animals, such as when a sheep perceives "hostility" in a wolf.[43] Both images and intentions are stored in the memorative faculty. The compositive imagination, then, is the ability to perform operations on both images and intentions, dividing them up into components, combining them with each other to form novel ones, attaching and replacing intentions to images, and so forth. Finally, this compositive form of imagination is crucial to the *cogitative* faculty, that is to "thinking" or "cognition" in the strict sense. Cogitation happens when the compositive imagination is set under the disciplined and voluntary control of the intellect.[44] This allows Avicenna to distinguish between disciplined thinking (where reason uses imagination as a tool) and the random, purposeless associations of the compositive imagination characteristic of dreams.

At this point we must consider another important distinction that Avicenna lifted from Aristotle and gave a platonizing interpretation: that between the active and the passive (or receptive) intellect. Aristotle needed a distinction of this kind because his metaphysics said that anything potential can only be brought into actuality by something already actual. Thus, since human intellection is a matter of a *capacity* for acquiring knowledge (rather than the Platonic view of "recollecting" forms already present in the mind), this potential capacity needs an actualizing agent.[45] The active or agent intellect, then, is an exact parallel to the prime mover in Aristotle's cosmology.[46]

Aristotle's somewhat sketchy treatment of this distinction has, however,

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43   See Black, "Imagination and Estimation," 60.

44   This separation between a passive and an active form of imagination appears to have been prefigured among some of the Neoplatonist interpreters of Aristotle that Avicenna also had access to. See for example the discussion of Stephanus of Alexandria in Blumenthal, "Neoplatonic Interpretations of Aristotle on *Phantasia*," *The Review of Metaphysics* 31, no. 2 (1977), 254–56.

45   While the distinction is made by Aristotle in *De Anima* 3.5, one should note that the terminology of active and passive intellect is introduced by his interpreters. On this see Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 42–43.

46   See e.g. Haldane, "Aquinas and the Active Intellect," 203.

occasioned a diversity of interpretations. In apparent conflict with the general flavour of his doctrine on the soul, it looks as if the active intellect is a unitary and universal entity that is, moreover, separate from all the passive intellects instantiated in each individual mind. This ambiguity was ripe for platonizing interpretations – a feature that the Neoplatonist commentators on Aristotle exploited fully.[47] This commentary tradition influenced Avicenna's views as well, and through him and Averroes it entered the Latin west, where it has since proved rather contentious.

According to Avicenna, the active intellect is associated with Allah, separated from the individual passive intellects. It contains all forms, and transmits them to the receptive intellects, setting them in motion. These forms are then "activated" when the senses provide the appropriate particulars for the intellect to consider. Thus, when an image formed from external impressions is comprehended, it is "actualized" in the potential intellect by virtue of the illumination of the divine, active intellect.[48] This brings us to an important point about the power of the (compositive) imagination: In the epistemology of Avicenna, the imagination is a powerful faculty that is central to understanding; however, it only attains this power when it is subservient to the intellect that emanates from the divine.

3.2 Entering the Latin world

As Deborah Black notes, "it is impossible to isolate any universal features that are common to all medieval exponents of the philosophical doctrine of internal senses".[49] Averroes, who would be viewed in the Latin world as the greatest of the commentators on Aristotle, differed markedly from Avicenna, replacing estimation with cogitation and collapsing the two distinct senses of imagination into one.[50] Among the scholastics, Albert the Great reinserted estimation and kept the distinction between a lower retentive imagination (*imaginatio*) and a higher compositive one (*phantasia*), while Thomas Aquinas followed Averroes in allowing a single imaginative faculty and held that animals have mere estimation where humans have cogitation.[51] In addition, there are

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[47]   See e.g. Blumenthal, "Neoplatonic Interpretations of Aristotle on *Phantasia*."

[48]   Avicenna explicitly uses the analogy of light with the active intellect, a metaphor that was widespread among platonizing readings of Aristotle. See e.g. Frederic M. Schroeder, "Light and the Active Intellect in Alexander and Plotinus," *Hermes* 112, no. 2 (1984): 239–48.

[49]   Black, "Imagination and Estimation," 68.

[50]   Ibid., 62-63. For other Latin commentaries, see de Boer, *The Science of the Soul* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2013).

[51]   Black, "Imagination and Estimation," 63–68.

differences in the views and functions of memory, not to mention a huge and theologically charged dispute about the nature of the active intellect.[52] Aquinas departed from Avicenna in viewing the active intellect as "a power of deriving intelligible forms from experience as presented by *phantasms*".[53] It is *not* a universal storehouse of forms, separate from each individual intellect, but the power that lets us extract the general from the particular – or, more technically, the "intelligible species" from the sensed object.

The question of how to understand the active intellect, and how it should be related to imagination, is crucial to our present task because it concerns the epistemic status of mental imagery. In general, the scholastics see the function of intellect as that which is able to extract the "intelligible species" of the images (or "phantasms") provided by the imagination from the senses and bring it into understanding in the potential intellect.[54] In other words, the scholastics replace the more straight-forwardly Platonic interpretation of Avicenna, in which the species (or forms) are *supplied by* the active intellect, with a *hylomorphic* view where the forms (or species) are out there in the concrete objects and are "discovered" by the inner senses under the guidance of the intellect (compare fig. 1 and fig. 2). Thus, the scholastics avoid the Platonic problem of why individuals do not always understand all things, but are left to cope with the problem of explaining how the mind comes to uncover the forms hidden in the world through a series of mental operations that culminate with understanding in the potential intellect.

This difference in orientation has wide ramifications for the power of the imagination and the other inner senses, for it means that they are already involved with uncovering forms originally put in nature by God, rather than merely receiving signals about matter that the intellect then orders by supplying divine forms. This change starts with Albert, who draws on Averroes, and continues in his student Aquinas, whose *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas* (1270) showed full awareness of the potentially heretical implications of postulating a separate agent intellect shared by all humans. In the faculty psychology that

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[52] See e.g. Haldane, "Aquinas and the Active Intellect," 205-210; cf. Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages*, 12-13. The dispute about the agent intellect was in fact so theologically sensitive that it inspired several condemnations and prohibitions against being discussed. See e.g. John Wippel, "The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7, no. 2 (1977).

[53] Haldane, "Aquinas and the Active Intellect," 205.

[54] There is a huge literature on the scholastic species theory. For an overview, see the two-volume study of Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1994 [vol. 1], 1995 [vol. 2]).
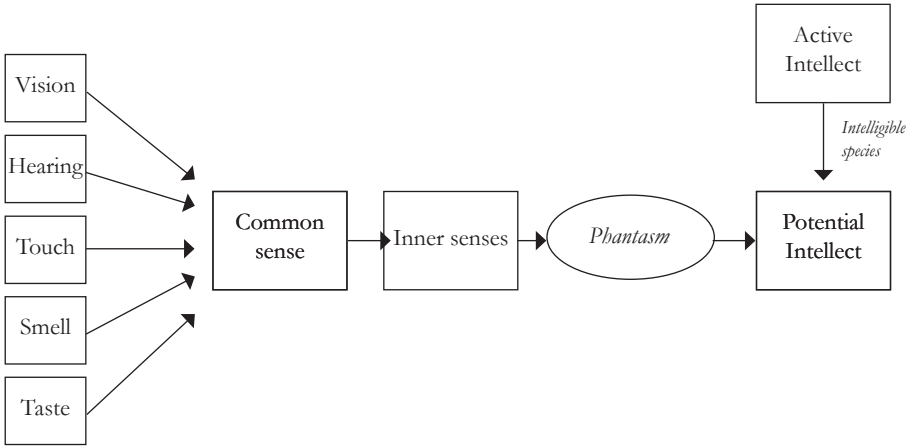
Fig. 1: "Platonized" mental faculties (Avicenna): Intelligible species are stored in the separate active intellect ("up there"), which illuminates the potential intellect. Understanding occurs when phantasms are supplied from the outside world and the internal senses that "match" the forms supplied by the active intellect.
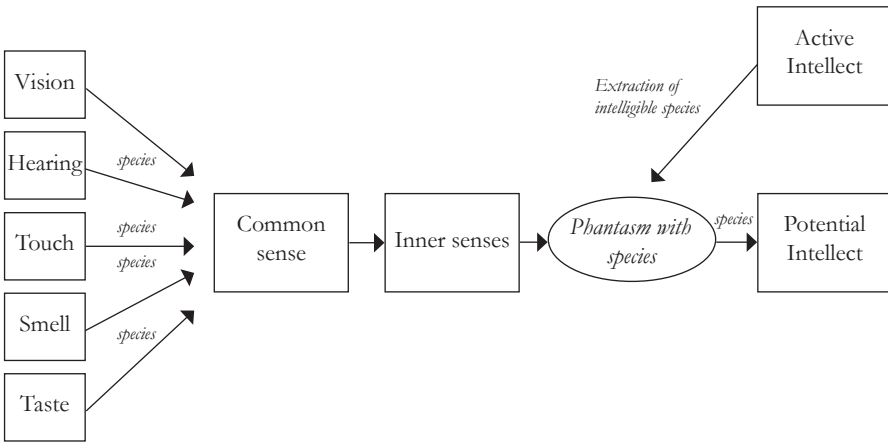
Fig. 2: Aristotelian-scholastic mental faculties (Albert, Aquinas): Intelligible species are in the things themselves ("out there"), and through a system of mediations they make imprints on the mind. The imagination creates "phantasms" that represent the species in the shape of images. The active intellect has the power to extract true species from the image and filter them into the potential intellect, which results in knowledge.

emerges from Aquinas, imagination plays a crucial function in understanding both universals and particulars as it provides the intellect with information of both, which the intellect can then use as a tool for generating understanding about physical objects in the outside world – as opposed to knowledge about universal ideas only.[55] Imagination, as the intellect's tool, brings out the spiritual in the material.

4. From Theory to Practice: Kataphatic Spirituality and Popular Devotion

The psychological theories of mental faculties were primarily developed from the scientific and epistemological concern with figuring out how the mind is constituted and how it lets us gain knowledge of the world around us. As we have seen, these endeavours were not separated from theology. But what is more, theoretical knowledge of the mind's faculties would also inspire new contemplative techniques. Another scholastic doctor is crucial in this development: The Franciscan Giovanni di Fidanza (1221–74), better known as the "Seraphic Doctor", Bonaventure.

Before turning to Bonaventure's significant contribution, however, we should recognize a few other important precursors for imagery-related practices that stand outside of the philosophical, Aristotelian–Platonic stream that we have been considering here. One particularly important vehicle of kataphatic spiritual practice is the monastic tradition, especially as it connects to the transformation of the art of memory in the early Middle Ages.[56] Less theoretically informed but all the more practically oriented, this tradition rested on the classical rhetorical instructions for creating "locations" and "images" in the mind in order to structure memory.[57] However, as Mary Carruthers has shown, the monastics went much beyond the classics. The monastic art of memory was primarily focused on crafting thoughts about God (i.e., prayers), and it was rooted in the (Platonic) injunction of the Egyptian hesychasts: *mneme theou* – remember God. [58] The notion of memory, intimately related

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[55] See Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 56–61.
[56] On this, see the indispensable works by Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); cf. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Carruthers and Jan M. Ziolkowski (eds.), *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).
[57] See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); but cf. the more up to date discussion in Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.
[58] Ibid., 2.

with imagination, was such that it provided a channel to the divine. However, that channel had to be built actively by practitioners: the art of memory was a *craft*, and practitioners needed to build their own tools (e.g., written and illuminated memory devices, visualized prayers) and hone their skills through practice. Moreover, it was not just the goals and philosophical presuppositions that distinguished the monastic art of memory from its classical precursors: its techniques were also imported from elsewhere. Carruthers has shown that there is a significant influence not only from hesychasm, but also from Jewish traditions of hekhalot and merkabah mysticism. Reproducing visions of angels and heavenly palaces are typical exercises in monastic art of memory texts, where the feathers on a seraph's wing or the dimensions of Noah's ark become the "loci" that practitioners use to compose and memorize prayers.[59]

Another stream that must be mentioned before we continue is the persistence of Neoplatonic ideas through the church fathers, especially Augustine. Augustine followed the common Platonic-Aristotelian fashion of seeing the imagination as an essential, but rather untrustworthy, mental faculty.[60] Although the imaginative faculty is important to the formation of memories and plays a role in cognition, it mixes sense data with beliefs in ways that lead to images of things that are not actually there, such as in dreams.[61] However, it would be a mistake to conflate the untrustworthiness of the imaginative faculty with a suspicion of all mental imagery: Augustine clearly held that "phantasms" produced by the imagination are not the only kind of mental image – *true* images come from the realm of timeless forms, which for him (again following middle-Platonist orthodoxy) was the mind of God. Thus, in his Trinitarian doctrine, Augustine conceives of God the Father as the storehouse of all forms, whereas the Son (or the Word) is the *expression* of forms.[62] The process of "illumination" by which divine light shines on the mind in order for it to gain knowledge thus mirrors the incarnation itself: Christ makes timeless truths knowable in actual human minds. All of this, however, had to do with the *intellect* rather than the imagination. This Augustinian idea remains visible in the common distinction between "corporeal", "imaginative",

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[59] See examples in Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 2, 60–115.

[60] On the negative attitude that Neoplatonists displayed toward the imagination as a faculty, despite their great interest in mental imagery, see e.g. Gerald Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought* (Galway: Galway University Press, 1988); cf. Karnes, *Imagination, Mediation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 25–31.

[61] On Augustine's view on the imaginative faculty, see Todd Breyfogle, "Memory and Imagination in Augustine's Confessions," *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994): 210–23.

[62] Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 66–7.

and "intellectual visions" in Catholic doctrine, where the intellectual type is held as the highest form of mystical comprehension.[63]

4.1 Bonaventure's Cognitive Theology

A touch of illuminationism did, as we have seen, survive in the Aristotelian lineage that inspired thirteenth century scholasticism. The tendency of people like Albert and Aquinas was, however, to diminish rather than emphasize it. Bonaventure, a contemporary of Aquinas, went in the opposite direction: Deeply steeped in Augustinian thought, he infused the basic Aristotelian view of human cognition with a heavy dose of illuminationist epistemology. The result was a cognitive theology in which the operations of the mental faculties mirror the dynamics of God's own mind, and divine illumination takes an active and intimate role in every cognitive act. This synthesis attributed powers to the faculty of imagination that it had never previously seen in the Aristotelian or the Platonic traditions. Moreover, Bonaventure's project did not merely seek to lay bare the workings of the mind: It developed into a contemplative practice that promised a route to God through operations on the mind's faculties.

The Seraphic Doctor's cognitive theology is most fully developed in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* ("The journey of the mind to God").[64] Following Augustine in the final part of *De Trinitate*, Bonaventure saw the faculties of the human mind as a mirror of the Trinity.[65] But armed with the Aristotelian inner sense tradition, Bonaventure gives a central role to the imagination as the faculty that mediates between fallible sense impressions and true apprehension by the agent intellect. Blending Aquinas' view of the faculties with Augustine's illuminationism, imagination, for Bonaventure, becomes intimately connected with the incarnation of Christ. Through the incarnation, Christ was himself the perfect mediator between the material and the spiritual – simultaneously man and God in one image. The imagination's role in cognition, according to Bonaventure, is thus a perfect analogue to the incarnation. Its images are built up from the material world of the senses, but in the act of comprehension, the divine illumination of the agent intellect reveals the intelligible species

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[63] For a brief overview, see Lucien Roure, "Visions and Apparitions," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15477a.htm> (accessed 18 April, 2016).

[64] For a trustworthy modern edition, see Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, ed. Stephen F. Brown, trans. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.

[65] For Augustine's analogy of the Trinity and human cognition, see especially *De Trinitate*, book XV. The interpretation of Bonaventure that follows is borrowed from Michelle Karnes.

(of divine origin) *in* the image. Taking a long step in a platonizing direction, Bonaventure replaces the agent intellect with Christ, and sees in the act of understanding a perfect analogy with Christ's descent into flesh. Through his incarnation, Christ is the super-image that guarantees safe passage from matter to spirit (or from sensation to knowledge). Thus, Christ intervenes directly every time one extracts species from phantasms – in a sense incarnating in the faculty of the imagination.[66]

The *Itinerarium* is both a philosophical and a contemplative work. The practical upshot of the cognitive theory is that contemplation on the mind's own processes – how we move from sense impressions to mental images, and how we come to true understanding through "illumination" – constitutes a way to knowledge of God, and, more specifically, of the Trinity.[67] Bonaventure uses the vision of the seraph's six wings as an image to develop six stages in a contemplative exercise that starts with the contemplation of physical things and the presence of God in the natural world, proceeds via the traces or "vestiges" of God in the inner senses, and ends with ascent through the light of illumination to the "Eternal Truth" of the divine.[68] Here is Bonaventure reflecting on the intended result, when the mind has ascended to a pure intellectual vision of God:

> Our mind has contemplated God outside itself through and in the vestiges; within itself through and in the image; and above itself through the similitude of the divine light shining on us from above in as far as that is possible in our pilgrim state and by the exercise of our mind. Now finally when the mind has come to the sixth step, in the first and highest Principle and in the mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ, it finds mysteries which have no likeness among creatures and which surpass the penetrating power of the human intellect. When we have contemplated all these things, it remains for the mind to pass over and transcend not only the sensible world but the soul itself. And in this passage, Christ is the way and the door. Christ is the ladder and the vehicle, like the Mercy Seat placed above the ark of God and the *mystery that has been hidden from all eternity*.[69]

Besides this lofty (apophatic) mysticism, Bonaventure's cognitive theology also informed a much broader programme of kataphatic spiritual devotion. Karnes

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[66]   Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 89–92.
[67]   The complicated and rather murky details of the Trinity's role in the mystical practice that Bonaventure prescribes is discussed by Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 99–109.
[68]   Ibid., 85.
[69]   Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, chapter 7, 1.

shows how Bonaventure's popular and vastly influential gospel meditations – namely the *Lignum vitae* (1260), the *Vitis mystica* (c. 1263), and *De perfectione vitae ad sorores* (1259–60) – tend to follow the same path recommended in the *Itinerarium*, from senses to mental images to illumination and knowledge of higher things. The intimate connection between the imagination and Christ makes gospel meditations a supremely powerful contemplative tool. For what if the practitioner uses the imagination – which is already analogous with the incarnation – to form images of Christ? Following Bonaventure's logic, this procedure provides intimate, first-hand access to the mystery of incarnation itself, because the phantasm of Christ created by the imagination interacts with the *actual* Christ in the form of the illumination of the agent intellect. Thus, gospel meditations are not only *about* the mystery of Christ's materiality and divinity, in the sense of being directed at a representation of it, but actually *recreate* that mystery and provide direct access to it.

While Bonaventure's cognitive-theological rationale for this practice was innovative, the kataphatic practices that he advocated would become anything but marginal. His gospel meditations contributed to what was becoming a major trend, transforming Christian religious practice in the late-medieval period: the rapid spread of practices aimed at personal piety through prayer and the contemplation of images. If we are to judge by the sheer number of surviving manuscripts, devotional literature such as the pseudo-Bonaventurean *Meditationes vitae Christi* (early-fourteenth century) and the *Stimulus amoris* (James of Milan, original late-thirteenth century, but vastly expanded upon in manuscript copies for centuries) were among the most popular spiritual texts of the later Middle Ages. In various versions and stages of completion the latter work alone exists in as many as 374 known manuscripts.[70] Indeed, the decisively most successful class of manuscript from the Middle Ages, having survived in tens of thousands of copies, is the book of hours genre – works that allowed the laity to emulate the strict prayer regimes of monastic practice.

5. Discussion: Two hypotheses about the influence of Christian kataphatic spirituality on esoteric practices

I will now return to the main question of the article: how are these imaginative practices related to the development of esotericism? The main hypothesis that I wish to defend (from now on H1) is that the popular affective piety move-

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[70]   Counted from data given by Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, 146.

ment of the later Middle Ages, grounded in philosophical developments that emphasized the power of imagination, provided a context for practices that we now consider esoteric. In addition, I also put forward the hypothesis that the fusion of the Aristotelian inner sense tradition with a Neoplatonic epistemology that played out in high scholasticism prefigures the sense in which the imaginative faculty is understood in later esoteric sources (H2). While the second hypothesis is relatively straight forward, requiring only that we show how the combination of Aristotelian and Platonic elements characteristic of scholasticism in fact continues among the Renaissance and early modern intellectuals that are often seen as revolting against scholastic philosophy, the notion of "influence" in H1 requires us to consider in some more detail what might count as evidence for that particular thesis. I will discuss H1 and H2 in turn, giving some empirical examples. Finally, I will discuss the issue of why – despite these connections with what can only be conceived of as orthopraxy – esoteric practices have, historically, been singled out and presented as a form of "rejected knowledge".

5.1 H1: The influence of Christian devotion on esoteric kataphatic practice
Two lines of evidence are required to support H1: evidence of *proximity* and evidence of *similarity*. By proximity, I mean evidence that establishes direct sociohistorical contact between the two practices – such as when a practitioner of A is also a practitioner of B. By similarity, I mean that concrete points of analogy can be established between practice A and B. When we have both proximity and similarity, we can argue that constitutive elements of B may have been borrowed from or influenced by A.[71] Given these criteria, it goes without saying that a lot more empirical work is needed to fully establish H1 than can possibly be undertaken here. All I can do in the following discussion is point to some areas where I believe such evidence ought to be sought.

I have already suggested that the element of similarity rests in a shared *kataphatic practice*. In popular devotion and esoteric practices alike (think, for example, of the practices now classed under "Christian theurgy"[72] or, perhaps,

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[71]   Technically, "similarity" alone is about analogical comparisons, while similarity with proximity establishes a homological comparison (whether diachronic or synchronic). For the intended sense of these terms, see Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33.

[72]   This category includes much that has previously been described (and dismissed) as "magic": the *ars notoria* tradition, along with specific works such as the *Liber iuratus Honorii* and the *Liber florum*, along with later forms of "angel magic" and "crystal gazing" all belong to this category. For a definition, see Claire Fanger, "Introduction," in idem (ed.), *Invoking Angels:*

"Western learned magic"[73]), we find techniques that regulate the practitioner's attention to mental imagery, typically with an explicit religious content, and stress the possibility of receiving some form of illumination or insight through sustained practice.[74] The constitutive element that interests me is, in other words, not so much a likeness in superficial features, such as specific symbols, the wording of a prayer, or even the goal of the practice. Instead, what matters is that the employed *techniques*, or the *means* of the practices are analogous. In terms of my earlier discussion of "composite ascriptions", we might even contrast an "esoteric" kataphatic practice (such as the *Liber iuratus*'s quest for a vision of the face of God) from a kataphatic practice of mainstream Christian piety in terms of similarity in ACTION but difference in GOAL. Since I am defining kataphatic practices in terms of their actions rather than their goals, to establish that one kataphatic practice inspired the emergence of a new one (as contrasted with a mere stylistic influence) one must focus on the steps that make up these patterned practices and how they work with cognitive dispositions for the cultivation of mental imagery – rather than what precise meanings they attach to such imagery and to the ultimate goals of the operation. In other words, a serious analysis of these features requires that the terms of the comparison are grounded in solid knowledge of how mental imagery cultivation works.[75]

In terms of establishing evidence of proximity between such practices, I will make two observations. First, the medieval affective piety movement, which was spurred on in part by the scholastic rehabilitation of imagination, was massively popular. Hence, most European Christians would be proximate to it, if not necessarily expertly skilled. Since "esotericism" does *not* exist as a

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Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 16–18. For an overview of its scope in the Middle Ages, see the other contributions to the same volume.

[73]   This category, which is much broader than "Christian theurgy," has recently been proposed as a useful conceptual tool for organizing diachronic research on "magic" by Bernd-Christian Otto, "Historicising 'Western Learned Magic': Preliminary Remarks," *Aries* 16, no. 2 (2016): 161–240.

[74]   For an insightful attempt to disentangle the mental techniques involved in *ars notoria* and related practices, see Frank Klaassen, "Subjective Experience and the Practice of Medieval Ritual Magic," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7, no. 1 (2012).

[75]   On this issue, see Asprem, "Explaining the Esoteric Imagination." For a useful discussion of what such a comparative analysis might look like, see Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 149–60. Taves draws, among other things, on medieval gospel meditations and contemporary Pagan visualization techniques. See also Taves and Asprem, "Experience as Event: Event Cognition and (Religious) Experience," *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (2016): 1–25.

separate "tradition" apart from the broader religious culture (at least not until the nineteenth century), it is simply to be expected that broad trends of the general culture would shape what we have retrospectively come to single out as "esoteric" elements in that culture. The fact that most people were already acquainted with techniques for cultivating mental imagery may help explain why the complex kataphatic procedures of the *ars notoria* were apparently spreading so rapidly in precisely the same period.

However, we can also make a more specific point by homing in on the sociocultural demographic that was most active in developing and disseminating esoteric practices in medieval Europe. As is well known, priests, monks, and students of theology are overrepresented. Esoteric practices took shape in what Richard Kieckhefer has famously called the "clerical underworld", where young, often itinerant people aspiring to the priesthood copied and shared manuscripts, borrowing elements from the liturgy as they went along.[76] It is already well established that the exorcism manuals distributed to minor clerics made a permanent mark on so-called nigromantic practices. We also know that John the Monk's *Liber florum* was not only written by a Benedictine monk given to visions from a young age, but that despite several public condemnations and book burnings it was precisely Benedictine networks that continued to spread and copy the book, eventually preserving it to the present day.[77] Sophie Page's study of St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury (more Benedictines) as a site for the collection, copying, and practice of the full range of available magical procedures provides further evidence of the importance of this learned, ordained audience to the development of esoteric practice.[78] These influential practitioners were most certainly in close proximity to kataphatic devotional literature. In fact, they were the experts.

5.2 H2: "The esoteric imagination" prefigured by the scholastic fusion of inner senses with Neoplatonism

H2 is a less ambitious claim, and only requires us to show that the esoteric notion of "imagination" among Renaissance and early modern intellectuals shows some continuity with the scholastic combination of Aristotelian and Platonic elements.[79] It will suffice to mention a couple of examples. First, Marsilio

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[76] Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 151–75.

[77] See especially the beautiful treatment in Fanger, *Rewriting Magic: An Exegesis of the Visionary Autobiography of a Fourteenth-Century French Monk* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

[78] Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

[79] It is worth noting that the connection between scholastic and esoteric thought has been

Ficino (1433–99) is typically considered the chief exponent of Renaissance Neoplatonism and is often given a central place in historical overviews of the "vis imaginativa" in what is presumed to be a heavily Platonic esotericism.[80] Such narratives, which we find reproduced by key esotericism scholars like Faivre, Goodrick-Clarke, Versluis and others, tend to emphasize the power of imagination as a Platonic innovation over the impotent and passive imaginative faculty of Aristotle and his scholastic henchmen. There is only one problem with this story: Ficino's account of the inner senses is lifted wholeheartedly from the scholastic tradition! It is true that the Neoplatonic element in Ficino is what makes the imaginative faculty particularly powerful, but this, we have seen, was the case already with Bonaventure and to a smaller degree with Albert and Aquinas. As John Cocking concludes, after summarizing Ficino's (inconsistent) pronouncements on sensation, the inner senses, and the intellect in *Theologia Platonica*:

> [O]n all these topics Ficino has nothing to add to the traditional views of the Neo-platonists, the Arabs and the Scholastics; nor does he favour any one particular scheme of things rather than another – he simply adopts the common features of all such accounts of the mind and its faculties and the kinds of experience involving images.[81]

Similar things can be said about Ficino's reinterpretation of Plotinus' daemons as working on the faculty of imagination (which is an example of Aristotelianizing Neoplatonism rather than Platonizing Aristotle),[82] and about his passionate defence of the survival of human personality after death.[83]

recognised by some modern esotericists knowledgeable about Catholicism. The twentieth-century Catholic esoteric author, Valentin Tomberg, recognised the deep compatibility of "high scholasticism" with what he considered to be "Hermetic" thought – even with explicit reference to Bonaventure. Faivre touched tangentially on this issue in his analysis of Tomberg: see Faivre, "Analysis of the *Meditations* of Valentin Tomberg on the Twenty-Two Major Arcana of the Tarot of Marseille," in idem, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 194.

[80] See for example Faivre, "*Vis Imaginativa*," 100–101.

[81] John Cocking, *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1991), 175.

[82] This Aristotelian (or rather, scholastic) reinterpretation of the daemon takes place in Ficino's translation of the *Enneads*. Moreover, it is largely a riff on Iamblichus, who already synthesized Aristotelian faculty psychology with a Platonic framework (see e.g. *De Mysteriis*, 3.30). See Anna Corrias, "From Daemonic Reason to Daemonic Imagination: Plotinus and Marsilio Ficino on the Soul's Tutelary Spirit," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2013).

[83] Anna Corrias, "Imagination and Memory in Marsilio Ficino's Theory of the Vehicles of the Soul," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 6 (2012).

The latter was delivered as an attack on contemporary Averroeism, and its motivation is thus entirely analogous with Aquinas's *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, written almost exactly two centuries earlier. Brian Copenhaver even argues, on the basis of textual similarities, that Ficino simply copied Averroes' alleged views from Aquinas' description in his attack on them.[84] Again, what Ficino contributed was not so much a criticism of something that scholastics accepted as a new way of using Neoplatonic elements to back up what were otherwise entirely orthodox scholastic claims: instead of drawing the higher soul (active intellect) down into the embodied soul, as did Aquinas, Ficino held that the lower soul containing the inner senses was, in fact, capable of surviving death. He did this by attaching the Aristotelian inner senses (in particular imagination and memory) to the pneumatic body or vehicle of the Neoplatonists. This move harmonized quite easily with the ventricular theory of the faculties common at the time, which held that the faculties were associated with the flow of air (*pneuma*) through the ventricles of the brain rather than with the biological tissue of the brain itself.[85]

If we fast forward to the early modern period and look at the famous illustration of the cognitive system in Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi historia* ("History of the two worlds", 1617–21), we find once again that it tallies with the inner senses tradition of the Aristotelian, Islamic, and scholastic psychologists (fig. 3).[86] Fludd lodges "imagination" between "sensation" and "mind", with a window on to the *mundus imaginabilis*, the "shadows" of the physical world. The scholastic interpretation of Aristotle's agent intellect acting on the passive intellect through illumination is still echoed in Fludd's connection of God and the angels with the "intellectual world", influencing the "mind" and playing a direct part in assessing the images sent forward from imagination. True, Fludd's way of connecting the faculties to broader cosmological realities composed of three distinct worlds – as well as how he explains phenomena such as prophecy and the occult mantic arts[87] – is deeply Neoplatonic. But the

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[84]   Copenhaver, "Ten Arguments in Search of a Philosopher: Averroes and Aquinas in Ficino's *Platonic Theology*," *Vivarium* 47, no. 4 (2009).

[85]   A theory that was, in fact, a retrograde development from the physiologically superior views of Galen and Avicenna. On the complicated and murky history of ventricular theory, see Christopher D. Green, "Where Did the Ventricular Localization of Mental Faculties Come From?," *Journal of History of the Behavioral Sciences* 39, no. 2 (2003).

[86]   See Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi historia, Tomus secundus de supernaturali, naturali, præternaturali, Microcosmi historia, in Tractatus tres distributa* (Oppenheim: Johann Theodore de Bry, 1619), first tractate, section I, book X, p. 217.

[87]   C. H. Josten, "Robert Fludd's Theory of Geomancy and His Experiences at Avignon in

Fig 3. The inner senses according to Robert Fludd

basic grasp of the cognitive system, including the central place of imagination itself as a mediator between the material and the spiritual, is the heritage of high scholasticism.

5.3 The Construction of Heteropraxy

In closing this discussion we should consider one final question: Why, given their common philosophical frameworks and imagery-based techniques, have we come to see some of these kataphatic practices as "esoteric" and others simply as "Christian"? This point concerns the historical production of "rejected knowledge", and its often anachronistic projection backward to earlier periods or to other cultures: Through processes of theological exclusion and policing of cultural boundaries, theologians and secular scholars alike have created and reproduced divisions between in- and out-groups in matters of "orthodoxy".[88] This has led to a proliferation of disjunctions, whereby very similar practices end up being interpreted as radically different, or even opposite in intent and character.[89] Disjunctions are the usual story with esotericism, whether we are talking about the bifurcation of "chymistry" into alchemy and chemistry, the separation of astronomy from astrology, or the pluralization of kataphatic spirituality that concerns us here. The focus on practice that I have suggested means that we should expand our focus from the construction of heterodoxy to the construction of heteropraxy. Since practice is more readily observable by authorities than beliefs, it seems likely that ecclesiastically enforced disjunctive strategies should focus on ritual creativity and innovations on practice that are perceived as "deviant".[90] However, when such innovations have been separated out and stigmatized as illicit, this may in fact endow these practices with a selective advantage among certain demographics, precisely due to their allegedly subversive character. As Leen Spruit has argued, the indexes of illicit literature created by the Catholic Church in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance came to serve as lists of recommended reading for Protestant reformers, religious dissidents, and those desiring forbidden knowledge.[91] If

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the Winter of 1601 to 1602," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964).

[88]   Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

[89]   On disjunctive strategies and their impact on our interpretation of history, see especially von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion,* 25–55.

[90]   On the difficulties involved in determining the "deviance" of what are often rather popular and widespread practices, see the discussion in Otto, "Historicising 'Western Learned Magic'," 203–207.

[91]   Leen Spruit, "Censorship and Canon: A Note on Some Medieval Works and Authors," in *How the West Was Won: On the Problems of Canon and Literary Imagination, with a Special Emphasis*

Rome forbade it, Protestant printers loved to sell it.

I already touched on what seems a crucial process in the creation of heteropraxy, namely what we might call a "displacement of goals".[92] In a Catholic context, focusing intently on one's mental imagery guided by exceptional cleanliness and prayer is seen as a noble thing if the image is the passion of Christ and the goal to comprehend God's suffering and sacrifice on behalf of humanity. When the same techniques are oriented toward images of angels with the intent of gaining knowledge of the liberal arts, the practice is considered dangerous magic and the books instructing it should be committed to the flames. John of Morigny's *Liber florum* remains a good example: the book's condemnation and burning in Paris in 1323 secured its status of heteropraxy, commanding the need for caution and secrecy, but also adding an attractive aura of transgressive power to those seeking forbidden fruit in the clerical underworld. These observations offer clues for further research on the creation of heteropraxy in the Middle Ages, whether through Aquinas' theological condemnation of *ars notoria*, the inclusion of various unnamed works of necromancy, geomancy, and witchcraft among Bishop Tempier's condemnations of 1277, or the physical extermination of practice manuals, as in the case of *Liber florum*.[93]

6. Conclusion

Looking at practices related to the imagination provides additional evidence that "esotericism" is an endogenous phenomenon in European religious history, which has gradually been separated out by disjunctive strategies rooted in the policing of orthopraxy. Particularly, I have argued that esoteric practice is intimately interwoven with the development of kataphatic spiritual practices with a basis in medieval theories of imagination that are rooted in the Arabic tradition of commentary on Aristotle. Based on this narrative, I have formulated two hypotheses: that esoteric kataphatic practices owe much to

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on the Middle Ages, ed. W. Otten, A. Vanderjagt, and H. de Vries (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 177.

[92] This is meant in rough analogy to the sociological notion of goal displacement, which focuses on how an instrumental activity originally pursued to obtain some goal may, over time, become a goal in its own right. This is a key characteristic of bureaucracies. See e.g. W. Keith Warner and A. Eugene Havens, "Goal Displacement and the Intangibility of Organizational Goals," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (1968): 539–55.

[93] On the condemnations of Bishop Tempier, see John Wippel, "The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris."

developments in late-medieval Christian piety, and that "esoteric" conceptions of imagination are indebted to the scholastic fusion of Aristotelian faculty psychology and Neoplatonic illuminationist theology. I have discussed some evidence that might support both hypotheses, but have suggested that more empirical work is called for. In conclusion, I wish to list what I see as the three most important domains on which such future empirical work should focus.

First, more attention needs to be given to the Medieval period, both as a context for the emergence of key practices and for the development of exclusionary strategies that form later disjunctions between orthopraxy and heteropraxy in the domain of kataphatic spirituality. Historians of magic have already paved the way; scholars of esotericism should work to integrate these studies fully into their narratives, and bring in a diachronic perspective that allows us to see how medieval developments shaped later esoteric currents. Secondly, the story I have told here suggests that the scholastic as opposed to the humanist roots of Renaissance and early modern esotericism still deserves further investigation. Do we, perhaps, need to get rid of the artificial markers of epochs such as "Medieval" and "Renaissance" in order to negate the boundary-work that the humanists so successfully put in place to distinguish themselves from the scholastics? Or do we, after all, want to make a bold argument in favour of the radical novelty of the Neoplatonic syntheses of the fifteenth century – even though such syntheses have their obvious precursors? Whichever way we want to settle these questions, it seems evident that we cannot tell the esotericism story in terms of Aristotle versus Plato (and Hermes and Zarathustra): the ancient sages were hybridized in the minds of philosophers and theologians long before some wealthy Italian patrons paid scholars to philosophize in private palaces instead of universities and monasteries.

Third, the Islamic background of core ideas and practices deserves much more attention. Again, intellectual historians focusing on magic and science have laid the foundations long ago. So far, it is mostly "occult sciences" like astrology and magic that have caught the attention of scholars of esotericism.[94]

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[94]   See for example the recent work of Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), which focuses on astrology. Medievalists studying magic have made major contributions to this line of research for decades. See especially the works of Charles Burnett – too numerous to be listed here, but see e.g. Burnett, *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages: The Translators and their Intellectual and Social Contacts* (London: Routledge, 2009); Burnett, *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Techniques in the Islamic and Christian Worlds* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996); Burnett and Contadini (eds.), *Islam and the Italian Renaissance* (London: Warburg Institute Colloquia, 1999.

In addition to this important work we also need to look carefully at the Islamic context of quite orthodox ideas on human nature and humanity's relation to the natural world and to God. In short, historicizing the imaginative faculty and unweaving its connections with practices and theological doctrines forces us to question some of the foundational assumptions of the field, pushing the study of "esotericism" backwards in history and outwards from Europe, to the Islamicate world and beyond.

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