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Secrets, Secrecy, and the Study of Religion

Jong, A.F. de

Citation

Jong, A. F. de. (2006). *Secrets, Secrecy, and the Study of Religion*. In .
Routledge, London. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/10709>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/10709>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

2 Secrets and secrecy in the study of religion

Comparative views from the Ancient World

Albert de Jong

“And you, Tat and Asclepius and Hammon,
hide these divine mysteries among the secrets of your heart
and shield them with silence.”

Asclepius 32¹

The comparative study of religion(s)

From its inception in the nineteenth century to the present, the academic study of religion has been dominated by the comparative method.² Alongside the study of individual religious traditions, most often on the basis of textual evidence, scholars have explored ways of studying “religion” and “religions” by comparing fundamental elements and strategies found in various different traditions. The validity of this approach to the study of religion has often been questioned, but it seems that no viable alternative has yet been presented.³ The comparative method in the study of religion is obviously fraught with difficulties. Power relations and ideology loom large in various stages of the process of comparison, for instance in the selection and naming of the subject, the selection of cultures or traditions to be compared, the description and contextualisation of the subject, and so on.⁴ This is why opponents of comparativism have little difficulty in pointing out the many examples of projects that have gone haywire, often on a monumental scale.

The accusations against comparative approaches are varied, but they roughly fall into two categories. Many students of individual traditions (e.g. Biblical scholars or specialists in Islam or Buddhism) feel that comparative approaches are reductionist in nature, in that they take elements from each area of specialisation merely to illustrate a common human pattern or strategy (or a “universal”). This they consider to violate the unique nature or distinctiveness of the tradition they know intimately.

Such concerns are voiced both by representatives of the religions ("believers" and "theologians") themselves, and by scholars who have been influenced by the wave of post-modern theories and approaches.

This first objection is often coupled to the second objection that comparative approaches have an essentialist agenda, that they aim at constructing the universal, unchanging, and (almost) metaphysical "essence" of a given phenomenon. If that were the aim of the comparative study of religion, the risk of subsequently imposing that essential meaning or function onto the various religions of humankind would become distinctly real. In this way, scholars would be able to force culturally conditioned meanings onto religions, communities, or individuals who are no longer expected or allowed to respond. Such processes of disembodiment or reification (or "epistemic violence") are often highlighted by post-modern scholars and by those working within the framework of post-colonial theory.⁵

This assortment of opponents to comparativism thus groups theologians (in the sense of those working explicitly from a religious perspective) and post-modern or post-colonial theorists together. None of them, however, have been able to escape the fact that classification and taxonomy are the most basic intellectual strategies of all humans, including scholars. To quote the famous statement by Jonathan Z. Smith:

The process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence. Whether revealed in the logical grouping of classes, in poetic similes, in mimesis, or other like activities – comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of noting either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought. Without it, we could not speak, perceive, learn, or reason.

(Smith 1993, p. 240)

This is why, in recent contributions that aim to defend or re-establish the comparative method, one is showered by words such as "inevitable," "indispensable," "ineluctable," or "unavoidable."⁶ The fact that comparison is the most important human way of learning forces us to pay it due attention in theoretical and methodological discussions. One cannot ignore, however, some of the issues raised by the opponents of comparativism: "power" and "politics" have had and continue to have a lasting impact on the development of scholarship and there is every reason to welcome analysis of this impact.

The point of departure for any comparative study of religious ideas and behaviour is given by human biology and sociobiology. There is, in other words, a certain level of unity in human experiences. Obvious subjects include food, kinship, sex, work, violence, competition, and death. These are aspects of the experience of all humans, and they always take place in social contexts because man is a social animal. Even though religion is found in all human cultures, "religion" does not seem to belong to this

group of human activities and experiences. It has no obvious evolutionary function to fulfil, but it is a human "universal." In the introduction to his fascinating study of tracks of biology in early religions, Walter Burkert introduces in addition to the biologically grounded phenomena a second set of human universals:

What is startling is the ubiquity of certain less trivial phenomena, which are culturally determined in every case and yet not generated nor explicable in isolation. They always appear integrated into specific cultures and take various shapes accordingly, but their unmistakable similarity makes them a general class transcending single culture systems. They must be presumed to fulfil basic functions for human social life in all its forms, even if it is easy to imagine alternatives. These universals include such disparate phenomena as the nuclear family with a marked role of the father and the special father-son relationship; the use of technology, especially of fire; interactions that include economic exchange but also warfare; and above all language, art, and religion. The last two mentioned may come as a surprise: what are in fact the functions of art and religion? They seem to be much less necessary for human life than the other items mentioned, yet they have been with us for all the time *homo sapiens* has been in existence.

(Burkert 1996, p. 4)

If religion is, in that sense, a "second-order" human universal, one would expect it to be deeply involved with primary human activities and experiences, which it obviously is, and to use these in developing its symbolic systems of meaning. Secrecy, the subject of the present book, is a good example. It is undeniably a biologically programmed capacity that is characteristic of the behaviour of many animals, who hide themselves or their young, hide food or knowledge of where food can be found and divert attention by focusing intently on imagined dangers (Burkert 1996, p. 25). It is also, on a secondary level, one of the basic strategies in group formation and, in its wake, the generation of individuality (see below). In religious traditions, in particular, it has also fulfilled an important function that one could call the creation of a unity of experience. It is ideally suited, therefore, for comparative study, as long as we specify the ways in which we are going to approach it.

Definitions of secrecy

Like many other subjects in the comparative study of cultures and religions, secrecy has usually been discussed thematically by specialists of individual traditions. This has led to a number of conference volumes, in which the "phenomenon" of secrecy is discussed in the religious traditions of India,

the Ancient World, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.⁷ Although many of the contributions to these volumes are excellent, they mainly provide materials to illustrate particular points. Thorough analysis of the concept of "secrecy" itself is remarkably absent from them. In fact, the various scholars representing "the religions" differ markedly in their interpretation or demarcation of secrecy. There is, of course, no binding definition of the concept; the statement that "secrecy has more often been defined than understood" (Tefft 1980, p. 35) may be true, but at least in comparative analysis, some sort of definition must precede our attempts at analysis and understanding.

Fortunately, the subject of secrecy has been explored and analysed in recent works using the tools of psychology, philosophy/ethics, and literary history.⁸ The sociology of secrets has been dominated by the work of Georg Simmel, which will be discussed separately below. On the basis of these works, we can isolate certain requirements for a comparative study of secrets and secrecy in religious contexts.

The two basic requirements are that a secret must be *intentional* and that it must be *social*, that is to say it must include three parties: two who share the secret and establish a bond to keep it, and the rest of humanity, as a third party, which is to be excluded. The private secrets of individual men and women of the past are not only most often lost to us (unless they were committed to writing), but also do not provide us any possibilities for comparative analysis. These are secrets that are governed either by the (biological) programme of saving one's life or safeguarding its quality or by mechanisms of modesty, shame, and so on. There are cultural constraints on these mechanisms and these may have been influenced by religious sensibilities, but this is not necessarily the case and our focus will therefore be on secrecy as a social institution.

The subsidiary requirement to the two mentioned is that the secrets must be capable of being formulated and transmitted. These requirements can be portrayed in four cases. We shall contrast secrecy with (1) other (types of) restrictions, (2) privacy, (3) esotericism, and (4) mysticism.

1 Secrecy versus other restrictions

From our first condition, that a secret must be intentional (i.e. the "owner(s)" of a secret must have the explicit intention not to reveal it, not keeping it for themselves merely out of negligence), it follows that we have to put aside a large set of data, as for instance restrictions on the grounds of purity, that may appear as "secret" only to an outside observer. A good illustration is provided by Parsi Zoroastrian fire-temples. Like some Hindu temples (for instance the famous Jagannatha temple in Puri) and like the two holy cities of Islam, Parsi Zoroastrian fire-temples may only be entered by members of the community. There can be no mistake about this: most fire-temples have plaques stating in Gujarati and English

(and sometimes Hindi) the fact that entrance is reserved solely to Parsis.⁹ Certain parts of the fire-temples themselves are also off-limits to most Zoroastrians, being the exclusive reserve for consecrated priests. The reasons for these restrictions have nothing to do with secrecy, but are guided by the concept of purity: fire-temples are the dwelling-places of consecrated fires and a high state of ritual purity must be preserved in these sanctuaries. Non-believers are by definition ritually impure and therefore cannot enter a fire-temple as long as a consecrated fire is present. In fact, whenever the fire is temporarily removed, for instance when a temple is being repaired or redecorated, non-Parsis are allowed to enter.¹⁰ The rituals in the fire-temples, moreover, are known in every minute detail, can be witnessed in schools for priests, and have been filmed and documented extensively.¹¹

In addition to concerns for purity, there are other restrictions that may be in force for reasons other than secrecy: selection on the basis of gender, for instance. Most religions prescribe certain rituals in which only women or only men are allowed to participate. In some cases, such restrictions may be connected with secrecy, but in others other social codes or etiquette seem to be the dominant concern. Similarly, there may be class restrictions, financial barriers, or many other types of exclusivism. It is true, of course, that the excluded parties may frown upon such institutions, and because of their feeling of being excluded launch the accusation of secrecy against the excluding group. This would be a subject for analysis only if one wants to study the use of "secrecy" in polemical contexts, but as long as secrecy is not explicitly intended, such institutions should not be considered to be "secret."

2 *Secrecy versus privacy*

Although we tend to claim privacy as one of the great characteristics of modern Western civilization, a certain wish for privacy seems to be common to all humans of all times and places.¹² The distinction between secrecy and privacy is vital in modern Western civilisation, but only, in the present author's view, as *moral* categories. Sissela Bok distinguishes secrecy from privacy in the following manner: whereas secrecy is "intentional concealment," privacy is "the condition of being protected from unwanted access by others – either physical access, personal information, or attention. Claims to privacy are claims to control access to what one takes – however grandiosely – to be one's personal domain" (Bok 1982, pp. 10–11).

In some Middle Eastern cultures, the concept of "modesty" would be roughly equated with Bok's definition of "privacy," but it is obvious that the backgrounds in both cases are thoroughly conditioned by cultural perceptions of individuality and social placement, and have a normative basis.¹³ Apart from its normative foundations in Western culture, privacy barely fulfils the requirement of being a social secret. Although its scope can extend to the sphere of the family, the moment it leaves this domestic

context, it immediately changes into "real" secrecy (or else, we would be forced to ponder the concept of privacy of any group of humans).

3 *Secrecy versus esotericism*

The terms "secret" and "esoteric" are almost interchangeable in common speech as well as in many modern studies of various religious traditions.¹⁴ In recent years, the field of "Western esotericism" has made a Cinderella appearance on the stage of the academic study of religion.¹⁵ The term is now used for a specific group of religious and spiritual movements that originated in the appropriation of certain types of knowledge and traditions from the Ancient World in the period of the Renaissance. As a consequence, the term "esoteric" can now be used in two distinct meanings: as a general term to refer to a system of interpretation focusing on finding extraordinary realities behind ordinary texts, persons, or objects, and in a special meaning referring to these European movements. In both meanings, the concept of secrecy is important. The movements themselves (spiritual alchemy, neo-Hermetism, Paracelsianism, theosophy, etc.) are often claimed or believed to be secret societies (which is by no means always the case). Also, in its general application, the term "esoteric" conjures up ideas of secrecy and concealment.¹⁶

It is crucial, however, to distinguish secrecy, as defined in social terms, from esotericism. Esoteric interpretations of texts and objects (including the cosmos) are found in many religions. They are also often claimed to be "secrets," but if they are, their "owner" is, to put it in squarely monotheist terms, God. Many of the branches of Islam, for example, are based on the distinction between *zāhir* ("manifest") and *bātin* ("inner, hidden") in their interpretation of the Qur'an, but they do not all keep the inner (and obviously more important) meaning hidden from others. What is there to penetrate, in most esoteric traditions, are the divine secrets, and those visionaries and others who have penetrated these secrets may choose to reveal them to all or to keep them within a limited circle.

Divine secrets, by definition, are not social secrets. Thus there is a split within the esoteric traditions: some of them are secret in that they restrict access to the keys for unlocking the hidden meanings, others are not, but share the knowledge gained freely and without reservation to those interested.

This can perhaps be illustrated by briefly discussing a little-noticed distinction in the Coptic texts that were found in 1945 in the vicinity of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.¹⁷ These texts, distributed over at least thirteen codices, twelve of which have been preserved along with some fragments of the thirteenth, form a collection of texts used by Egyptian Christian monks in the fourth century CE. Not all of the texts are Christian (the exceptions being a fragment from Plato's *Republic* and two Hermetic texts), and not all of the Christian texts are gnostic, but the collection includes an important number of texts that represent

Christian gnosticism, including texts that are reminiscent of the gnostic texts quoted in anti-gnostic polemics by the Christian theologian Irenaeus and the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus.¹⁸ Several of the texts in the collection are "esoteric" in that they claim to give the "real" meaning of many biblical passages, often on the authority of a divine revelation.

Within the corpus, quite a few texts begin with an indication of secrecy (the opening words of the *Gospel according to Thomas*, for instance, are "These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down"), but many of these end with a doxology and an announcement that the truth is now finally revealed and made known to all.¹⁹ The function of secrecy in these texts, apart from investing it with special importance by ascribing it as a divine (self-) revelation to important holy persons, is chiefly to give a reason for their sudden, unexpected appearance. This mechanism is well known from many ancient texts, which often claim to transmit knowledge or texts from before the flood (the books attributed to Enoch, for example, and certain parts of Mesopotamian literature), thus having to give a reason for the fact that these very ancient texts made their first appearance thousands of years after their alleged composition (Tromp 1993, p. 147).

Only a small number of texts, however, end with the command of keeping the text or the knowledge secret. Some texts stress the fact that the revealed knowledge is only destined for a select group ("the race of Seth") and others end with exhortations to silence and impressive oaths and threats (especially the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth Sphere*). So, within this corpus of esoteric literature with secret origins, only a part continues to keep the texts or knowledge secret. This split in esoteric traditions can be observed in many different religions and systems. It is important, therefore, not to consider all esoteric literature secret in a social sense.

4 Secrecy versus mysticism

The final vital distinction is between secrecy and mysticism. Like gnosticism and magic, mysticism as a concept defies precise definition and is, therefore, problematic.²⁰ Several religions that originated in the Near East in late antiquity (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hermetism) encapsulate traditions that stress the possibility of attaining unity with the divine. This unity is most often described, sometimes at length, as a process of melting, as loss of individuality, and as bliss and similar terms. The central aspect of it is the experience itself, which in most cases is described as ineffable. There literally are no words to describe what happens exactly, although this has not deterred many individual mystics to attempt to do just that. For our study, this implies that the mystical experience is not a "secret" because it cannot be transmitted or shared, nor shielded from outside inspection.

The pioneering efforts of Georg Simmel

No exploration of secrecy in the religious traditions of the Ancient World can be complete without a mention of the first and most influential theorist on the subject, the German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1858–1918).²¹ The work of Georg Simmel is known as the most important example of formal sociology. He pioneered the construction of “social types,” most famously the social type of the “stranger” in society. For Simmel, individuals are *produced* by society. To instantiate this, Simmel (notorious for his refusal to start from definitions) starts his portrayal of types of social structures by looking at the relations between two individuals, as the smallest possible social grouping, but particularly focuses on what happens once we move from a dyad – two individuals – to a triad, which in his analysis is the first “group” and therefore the first subject for the sociologist. This is because only a triad makes it possible for a group to display the basic characteristics of group behaviour that are impossible in unions of two: majority decisions overruling minority points of view, mediation, and the strategy of divide and rule.

The main part of his seminal study “The Sociology of Secrets and of Secret Societies” (Simmel 1906) is devoted to the idea of the “secret society,” which, as we shall see, is only of limited relevance for the Ancient World. In the first part of his study, however, he sets out the basic rules of secrecy as a social phenomenon. Secrecy, first of all, is a “triadic” phenomenon in a double sense: it not only manifests itself in triads – consisting of two (or more) individuals who share the secret and the third party (the rest) from whom it must be shielded – but it also consists of three different operations, namely: concealing (initially), hiding (lasting), and revealing (spontaneous). These three options (“Interaktionstriade,” Nedelmann 1995, p. 1) are of crucial importance for each and every individual because in choosing to hide or to reveal something of himself, an individual can create social proximity or social distance with respect to another person. To use a modern example, the minimum requirement for any real social interaction between two persons in contemporary Holland is knowledge of one’s family name. All other items of knowledge, one’s first name, professional position, address, phone number, marital status, religion, history, income, and so on may be revealed, but this is not necessary. By selectively “revealing” such items, one has the option of maximising or minimising social proximity. Revealing one’s first name usually implies moving from formal to informal modes of address, showing pictures of one’s children opens up the possibility of discussing private joys or sorrows, discussing one’s research can provide a special limited field of proximity, a proximity which does not, however, necessitate the disclosure of one’s political or religious position.

The process of hiding or revealing thus shapes the individual and enables every person to create an individual world of interaction.²² This

is not limited to processes between individuals; the same procedures can apply to groups of people, and in all cases secrecy plays a decisive role. This is why Simmel adamantly stressed the social productivity of secrecy. Secrecy as a social phenomenon was "one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity" (Simmel 1906, p. 462) and neither politics nor religion could exist without it. It is important to stress this point because especially in the fields of psychology and ethics, secrecy is often considered to be harmful. No one will deny that secrets can be terribly upsetting to the individual, but this chiefly belongs to the realm of individual psychology (Kelly 2002). Likewise, state secrecy is undoubtedly harmful for private interests and therefore a problem for ethicists.²³ It is possible that secrecy in religious communities can likewise cause harm to individuals, but as a rule, its benefits are greater than its drawbacks.

The Ancient World²⁴

All ancient religions were characterised by a certain amount of secrecy. There were restrictions that applied to parts of the temple or the temple as a whole;²⁵ there were rituals without any human audience, featuring only the god and his priest or the king;²⁶ and knowledge and texts were kept out of reach from all but a few trusted ones.²⁷

As a consequence, there are serious distortions in the evidence we have access to. On the one hand, one could say that we know more than most people in antiquity: we can excavate buildings that were off-limits to the vast majority of people in the Ancient World and we can study texts that were meant to be distributed only to those initiated, if we are fortunate enough to find them. If we take the Roman mysteries of Mithras as an example, we can study their various manifestations over a period of several centuries in a stunning variety of geographical and social settings: from Britain to Syria, from the traces of a modest wooden structure to richly decorated cave-like buildings. We have hundreds of works of art that can be compared and analysed, and inscriptions that offer the hope of drawing up social profiles as well as religious ideas and practices.²⁸ Almost none of these materials were available to the few authors in antiquity who attempted to write something about these mysteries and we can, in many cases, point out the distortions they introduced in their descriptions.

Unfortunately, we also know a lot less than most people in antiquity. The passage of time has removed from our collective memory and from the records of history and archaeology the overwhelming majority of "facts" that we would now be eager to know. This is true in general, of course, but it is particularly true if we want to study the secret traditions of the Ancient World. Since we have to rely on the records that have been preserved, we have lost everything that was transmitted orally, as well as most things that were written down. Our chief sources of information, the material records, are themselves often very difficult to interpret, and

they remain silent, of course, about the majority of the secrets they once harboured. Writing on clay, it now turns out, is an excellent option if you want your records to be preserved over several millennia, but this was probably the least of the concerns of the scribes of Mesopotamia. Thanks to the scribal cultures of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, the particularities of the climate of Egypt (its extreme aridity, which favours the preservation of papyrus), the efforts of medieval monastic organisations where manuscripts in Greek and Latin were copied, and the diligence with which various other religious traditions (Judaism, the religion of the Samaritans, Zoroastrianism, Mandaicism) have preserved their literature, a lot of information has fortunately survived, but it is needless to say that Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome are documented in a much more substantial way than all other cultures. Any reconstruction of the spiritual worlds of antiquity is therefore by definition very provisional. With the data we have, we can discuss three different subjects: secret knowledge, secret rituals, and secret identities.

Secret knowledge

To be able to speak of secret knowledge, we must first tackle its opposite, the “public” nature of knowledge in antiquity. Here, fortunately, we have an excellent guide in Pamela Long’s recent book on technical arts and the culture of knowledge from antiquity to the Renaissance (Long 2001). Long’s book is, in effect, one of the first attempts to study manifestations of a very recent concept in not so recent cultures. The concept is *intellectual property*, a highly significant subject of a specialised section of law and jurisprudence in our times, since it involves such enormous quantities of money. To study the history of this concept in Western culture, Long has studied manuals on catapults, metallurgy, and many other technical subjects that are and were relevant for Western societies and especially for the military establishment. In her study, she distinguishes between this technical knowledge, which was usually guarded with secrecy, and religious knowledge that was equally secret. Long suggests that the secrecy of technical literature was guarded by guilds or families, because it was one of the foundations of their wealth and well-being, whereas the religious literature was kept secret because it was so “sacred” that to reveal it to others would be a case of “profaning” the mysteries. To quote from her introduction:

If there is evidence for intentional concealment, what is the context and how does it function? Is it, to mention just two possibilities, the secrecy of a priest of a mystery cult, protecting sacred knowledge from defilement by the common rabble, or the secrecy of the medieval artisan, protecting craft knowledge in the interest of profit?

(Long 2001, p. 7)

This distinction is actually questionable. One does not even have to introduce Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic capital," although we might, to show that there is not as much difference as Long seems to suggest. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* clearly shows how expensive it could be to be initiated into mystery cults.²⁹ These movements did not just revolve around spiritual goods, but also controlled sums of more easily quantifiable goods. To hand out secret knowledge in that sense would also imply spoiling the market. But not all knowledge was for sale; some of it was simply to be had by those able to find it.

Estimates of literacy rates for any ancient culture rarely rise above 10 percent of the population (and hover around 1 percent for Mesopotamia). This means that "published" works in writing were inaccessible to the vast majority of the population. Political processes often excluded sizeable portions of the population: women, slaves, and peasants. Practical knowledge in crafts and trade was passed on in families or in guilds. Education was often neither public nor free, and in many cases was not considered desirable.

In religious matters, the situation was not very different. The primary *locus* of religious socialisation, of the transmission of religion, in most ancient cultures, was the family.³⁰ Children were brought up in the religion by taking part in domestic rituals, by taking part in festivals with their family members and by being taken to the temple by their parents or grandparents.³¹

Those who chose religion as their vocation or were destined for a job in a religious organisation were taught their rituals and other practical knowledge by their older colleagues in a style very similar to the transmission of craft knowledge. For this particular subject, there is a striking difference between the ancient cultures of the Near East and Egypt on the one hand and the institutions of the Greeks and Romans on the other. In Mesopotamia, in particular, priesthood was a lifelong vocation that involved vast amounts of study. The rituals that were performed were complicated and priests were expected to have a solid grounding in theology and literature; they were, as a consequence, literate and most of them were considered to be scholars (Bottéro 2001, pp. 119–25).

Among Greeks and Romans, most priesthoods were of a completely different nature. Priesthoods were chiefly honorary positions that could easily be combined with other professional careers. They were not associated with great learning (although priests could be required to radiate moral authority) and required little formal training (chiefly knowledge of the rituals themselves). Priests were not, in general, transmitters of sacred traditions.³²

It is in these different modes of organisation that we can find the difference in "secret traditions" that meets the eye when Graeco-Roman and Mesopotamian cultures are compared. In both cultures, religion was very much a state affair and temples played an important role.³³ But the

concept of secret knowledge in Mesopotamia, with its tradition of scholar-priests, was largely confined to the temples and is evidenced by ever more impressive "secrecy colophons" attached to tablets containing scholarly and religious texts (Beaulieu 1992). Among the Greeks, by contrast, secret traditions in their social sense were only rarely associated with temples. Several sanctuaries, it is true, were places of divine inspiration, and messages and information about the inner workings of these oracles were probably restricted to the personnel of these places (Johnston 2004a), but in general, temples were not houses of learning.

Among the Greeks, the concept of secret knowledge gained currency in small groups consisting of a teacher and his pupil(s). The paradigmatic examples of such teachers are Pythagoras and Empedocles.³⁴ In such small-scale settings, at least as transmitted in the traditions surrounding these teachers, knowledge that was believed to represent truths about reality that not every mortal was able or entitled to acquire was transmitted and developed. It required a conscious effort on the part of those interested to gain access to these traditions. In the many manifestations of these groups, there was a whole range of options to restrict access to these truths or to prepare the candidate properly. Common features were preparatory purifications, dietary and clothing rules (and similar prescriptions for the style of living), and formal or informal teaching. These options, which were almost never *all* present as far as we can now reconstruct, constituted a preparatory path following which the truths could be revealed to or perceived by the candidates.³⁵ One of the most important common features undoubtedly is the *regime* itself, regardless of its technical details, and the *time* it took. One of the things that can be perceived in most cultures is that there is a correlation between the raising of expectations, the promises made, the often strenuous demands of purification and mortification, and the resulting insight. The insight itself is culturally specific, but the preparatory programme shows striking cross-cultural similarities.³⁶

The (obvious) question whether the knowledge that was accumulated in this setting was too sacred to be revealed to those without proper preparation or was to remain out of reach for such people is a very modern one. The connection between the two is the factor of experience: knowledge revealed in the proper setting transforms the person who receives it.³⁷ To hand it out to those without preparation was perhaps not necessarily seen as offensive, but rather it was considered to be pointless: there was no way it could be effective. Thus, in the development of Platonism as a religious tradition, the injunction against silence is often encountered for the stated reason that people may laugh at the knowledge that is passed on.³⁸

What was handed down? In order to give a rough sketch of the contents of these secret, initiatory traditions, which are exemplified by Pythagoras

and Empedocles, we need to rely on a much broader selection of sources than the small fragments of the writings that have been preserved of these early thinkers. The most important set of data, in this author's opinion, is presented by the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of texts that was passed on under the name of the god Hermes Trismegistus, the Greek incarnation of the Egyptian god Thoth.³⁹ These are texts from roughly the first three or four centuries CE, separated by more than half a millennium from Pythagoras and Empedocles. This gap can be filled with several other movements and traditions, but the history of these traditions largely remains to be written. The connections between the earlier emblematic figures and the Hermetic movement were clearly pointed out by Peter Kingsley (1995, pp. 371–75). The Hermetic texts are favoured here because we can perceive the *system* of instruction and initiation through these texts.⁴⁰

1 One common denominator in the content of such traditions seems to be the perception of living truths underlying ordinary things: well-known stories about the gods ("myths"), passages cited from early authorities (especially Homer) and similar texts that were read by everyone, and, of course, the cosmos itself. Under the right guidance and with the proper preparation, pondering these ordinary things could lead to other, better understandings of reality. We can see this, for example, in Porphyry's interpretation of the Homeric story of the Cave of the Nymphs.⁴¹ A special case in this respect is, for example, alchemy in its "spiritual" form: working with metals, dye-stuffs, and furnaces could be a goal in itself, but was increasingly seen as a method of acquiring "saving knowledge," especially in the works of the Hermetic alchemist Zosimus of Panopolis.⁴²

2 A second, related, element is what one could call the "defragmentation" of reality or experience. Our common experience leads to a fragmented view of reality; various experiences or subjects are relevant to particular sections of our life, which we can store, so to speak, in different boxes. This is what Mary Douglas calls "boxing" or "framing" (Douglas 2002, pp. 78–79). Religion, work, family life, and leisure can be kept separate. Within these domains, further fragmentation is common: we can associate mathematics, for instance, not only with trade or practical uses, but also with philosophical or religious purposes, or we can develop it as a career. The hidden teachings most often stress the interrelatedness of all these things, of all human experiences.

Almost every aspect of human culture and experience could thus be presented or reinterpreted in the light of overarching themes that are not ordinarily associated with them. Typical subjects in this domain are theories about the organisation of the cosmos, the human soul, and the reality of the divine. In the interrelations between these subjects, reality

could almost be reduced to a single unified domain. This simplification of experience was thought to reveal profound truths that would transform a person's life. This transformation should be connected with the whole preparatory path more than with the insight itself. The best example of this is the fact that in several religious systems of antiquity and later times, including Greeks, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, one could sum up the only truth that a person needed to embody and experience in a short phrase: "He who knows himself, knows All."⁴³ This Hermetic maxim was surely part of texts that circulated widely, and access to the idea was by no means restricted, but the path leading up to the experience of this truth was long and arduous.

3 A third element is the important subject of the power secret knowledge could bring. The experience of hidden truths not only changed a person's view of reality or transformed his life, but could also invest him (or her) with hidden powers. These claims can most obviously be associated with those elements of secret traditions that taught the hidden names of divine beings in order to enable the candidate to influence them; the formulas, words, and symbols with which his soul could find a path beyond this world. None of this knowledge was useful without a proper knowledge or understanding of its origins or of the workings of reality. Revealing them to the uninitiated could be perceived as dangerous, in their leading persons to places or stages for which they were unprepared, or as pointless, in their giving someone instruments he would be unable to use. It is clear that these claims cannot be tested empirically and should therefore be seen, first of all, as rhetoric or propaganda emanating from the circle of believers themselves.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* is one of the most extensive sources for this type of "secret knowledge." It reveals several of the characteristics mentioned above: the visionary setting of the *Poimandres* (ch. I), for instance, in which truths are revealed, initially, in visual experience, and then explained by a divine teacher. The texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and similar literature frequently use the language of silence: it is only in silence, in speechless words and soundless song, that the mind can access God. The most important Hermetic text on the subject of secrecy is ch. XIII, which contains a "secret hymn" that is said to be "a secret kept in silence" and may not be divulged. The reasons for this silence and secrecy are located in the "suppression of all the senses" (ch. X.5) that is considered necessary for true understanding. These techniques of guided meditation or contemplation ("mystagogy") are evidenced most impressively in the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* that is preserved in the Nag Hammadi codices. This text culminates in the vision of the self by the "ego" of the text. It is, probably, the closest we can get to the

experience of rapture. Alongside these mystical elements, however, it also contains strings of vowels and hidden names of divine beings and thus combines the various elements of hidden teachings that were outlined above.⁴⁴

Secret rituals

The language used in the section on secret knowledge comes very close to the language necessary for secret rituals, to the language of initiation and mystery cults. The Greek word *mysterion* itself, from which our word "mystery" derives, means "initiation." It is derived from the verb *myeō*, "to initiate," and it came to mean "(divine) secret," chiefly in early Christian literature.⁴⁵ Without any doubt the most important secret from the Ancient World was connected to the Mysteries of Eleusis (Burkert 1983, pp. 248–97). A large number of the citizens of Athens took part in these Mysteries at some stage of their lives and the "secret" of the initiation must, therefore, have been well known (Bremmer 1995b, pp. 70–78). It was, however, guarded and enforced with much energy. Profaning the secret by telling non-initiates about the Mysteries, even hinting at them, or acting them out in a public context was punishable by death. Several cases of such accusations have in fact been preserved. Thanks to some "revelations" in literary texts, modern scholarship has been able to reconstruct some elements of the Mysteries, but there remain some important gaps in our reconstructions.

There were, in the Ancient World, many other places where such local mysteries were celebrated. In one case, we even possess the "Rule" of the Mysteries, a long inscription that details many of the functions and rituals of the Mysteries of Andania on the Peloponnese.⁴⁶ This text is important in that it shows us a lot of the "outer" workings of a traditional Greek initiation cult: it describes in detail the vestments to be worn, rules for hair and make-up, the order of the procession, and so on. It also gives us a hint of the less than solemn aspects of such rituals, which involved a large number of people. Among the officials of the cult were the rod-bearers, who had to discipline those in attendance, with force if necessary. What the inscription does not reveal, however, is the actual secret of the initiation.

Several of the other mystery cults of antiquity had different patterns of organisation. Alongside the local sanctuaries that did not even attempt to spread out geographically (the model set by Eleusis), there were mysteries associated with wandering priests (Dionysus, the Mother of the Gods), temples with personnel that replicated themselves all over the world (the Egyptian Isis) and clubs that had both social and religious aspects (the mysteries of Mithras).⁴⁷ In most of these, the rituals of the initiation were kept secret and in many cases they have remained secret: we do not know what went on (exactly). This has led generations of

scholars to hunt for these secrets in the sense of hunting for their secret texts (*hieros logos*) and knowledge, but most scholars today agree that guarding the secret of initiation had little to do with secret theologies, that such theologies in fact probably never existed.

The secret of the Mysteries of Eleusis was said to have been based on the "awe" inspired by the goddess (Demeter). It was the reverence of the gods that kept people from talking about these rituals. This explanation has been deemed "fully satisfactory" (Bremmer 1995b, p. 72), but it is less than satisfactory to explain the similarities that can be observed in most of the other mystery cults.

There are, obviously, sociological mechanisms at work here: the secret around which the mysteries were (thought to be) centred was one of these cults' chief strategies to attract a new following (Johnston 2004b). But there may actually be more. One of the chief functions of secrecy in this initiatory context must have been the function of "control for experience." In all cases of initiation, the prime motivation for guarding the secret seems to have been the wish to safeguard the emotional impact of undergoing the ritual. Revealing the rituals and their symbols beforehand meant not only transgressing sacred institutions or betraying bonds, but also spoiling the effects the ritual was supposed to accomplish.

To give some examples: it is known especially from works of art, which are much less reticent than texts in displaying elements from the mystery cults, that initiations could culminate in a "hierophany," the revelation of a sacred object. In Eleusis, this was in all likelihood an ear of corn, and in Bacchic initiations, the cult of Dionysus, this was a replica of a phallus kept hidden under a veil in a winnowing basket (Burkert 1987, pp. 93–97). Neither the ear of corn nor the phallus were hidden symbols for the cults of Demeter and Dionysus; on the contrary, they clearly belong to the standard cult iconography of these deities. It is not likely that these objects were explained in the rituals as having some hidden symbolic meaning. It must have been the experience of revealing otherwise perfectly ordinary symbols as the culmination of rituals involving darkness, the swaying of torches, ritual shouts, dancing, and self-flagellation that was meant to produce a certain effect. If the whole sequence of the ritual was known beforehand and the candidate for initiation was simply biding her time until the penis in the basket was finally shown to her, the experience of the ritual would have been palpably different from a scenario in which the candidate did not know exactly what was going to happen. The materials we have are limited in this respect, but it seems likely that the strategy of concealment here, as well as in most other cases, was more significant than the "contents" of the secret. This should, however, not be pushed to its extreme. We know of several rituals in which the candidate at least knew *something* because he was expected to be prepared to do certain things. A good example is the initiation into the grade of *Miles* in the mysteries of Mithras, during which the candidate had to shake off

a wreath placed on his head and proclaim solemnly that Mithras was his wreath.⁴⁸

There thus are various options: in certain initiatory contexts, secrecy was most likely used as a control for experience, whereas the secrecy of rituals in regular meetings (ritual meals, for instance) lay more in the special significance these rituals were thought to have had and in the wish to celebrate these in a fitting manner with initiated members only.

Secret identities

The final subject to be discussed is the "secret identity," the existence of secret societies in the Ancient World. This is a problematic field for various reasons. The first of these is documentation. It belongs to the characteristics of secret societies that they can hide their existence completely, since they rely on a mutually agreed bond of concealment (Simmel 1906, pp. 469-72). In general, such secret societies do not manage to remain secret for a long period, but it is certainly possible that there were various secret societies in the Ancient World of which we remain wholly unaware for total lack of documentation.

In most cases this is not the case. Various religious movements in the Ancient World may have been elusive or secluded, but they were not altogether unknown. To remain entirely unknown creates difficulties in the area of recruitment. More often, concealment is attributed to various groups without a real foundation in the sources. This applies particularly to gnostic Christianity, which is habitually described as secretive.⁴⁹ This description, however, is an inextricable part of the fierce polemics against these Christians by other Christian authors and requires much more solid documentation than is usually offered.

In view of the structure of religious life in antiquity, characterised by the dominance of (polytheistic) civic cults and the absence of religious exclusivism, the emergence of real secret societies with a religious agenda is not really to be expected.

Participation in the so-called "mystery cults" did, however, offer those interested the option of enriching their life with something extra and secrecy added to this new identity. It is beyond doubt that the secrecy of certain groups was a major element in their attraction to outsiders.

Final considerations

Secrets and secrecy are annoying for scholars. There are many things we do not know and do not understand. There are many secrets from the Ancient World that were kept and remain as gaps in our knowledge. In those cases where we believe we *do* have the knowledge that was transmitted, however, it seems that the content of the secret traditions was less relevant than the secrecy of the traditions itself. We can attempt

to reconstruct the main sociological and psychological mechanisms operative in the secret traditions.

Most importantly, secrecy ensured the social cohesion, attraction, and prestige of the movements and created a unity in experience. It fused private instruction, ritual, the manipulation of symbols, and above all time and expectation together. For comparative purposes that will have to do. Those who are still interested in the particulars of the ancient mysteries will have to reconcile themselves with the fact that many initiates in antiquity have, indeed, obeyed the commands of Hermes Trismegistus and have shielded the divine mysteries within themselves with eternal silence.

Notes

- 1 *Asclepius* 32 (Copenhaver 1992, p. 87).
- 2 For instructive overviews, see Sharpe 1986 and especially Kippenberg 2002.
- 3 For recent discussions, see, *inter multos alios*, Patton and Ray 2000, and the special issues of the journals *Numen* 48/3 (2001) and *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16/1 (2004).
- 4 A landmark study of these dangers is Platvoet 1982.
- 5 For instance, see King 1999. See also Doniger 2000 for an elegant discussion of the issues.
- 6 These have all been taken from the contributions to *Numen* and *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* referred to in n. 3, most often from their titles.
- 7 Bolle 1987; Kippenberg and Stroumsa 1995; Wolfson 1999. A collection of contributions from the social sciences can be found in Tefft 1980.
- 8 Psychology: Kelly 2002; ethics: Bok 1982; (literary) history: Long 2001.
- 9 See Hartman 1980, plates VII, VIII, IX, for illustrations.
- 10 This was told to the author of this essay by Professor Shaul Shaked, who was fortunate enough to be in Mumbai on such an occasion. The status of fire-temples in Iran is slightly different in that some of them do allow non-Zoroastrians restricted access; see Stausberg 2004, pp. 175–77.
- 11 See Stausberg 2004 for an impressive survey.
- 12 See the historical essays in Moore 1984.
- 13 This is not a critique of Bok's insistence on keeping the distinction between secrecy and privacy, since hers is a work on ethics, not a sociological inquiry.
- 14 One can also add "arcane," "occult," and similar terms to this inventory.
- 15 The names most commonly attached to this remarkable episode are those of Antoine Faivre (e.g. Faivre 1994) and Wouter Hanegraaff (e.g. Hanegraaff 1996).
- 16 An overview is given in Faivre 1999.
- 17 The Nag Hammadi texts have all been published in the series *The Coptic Gnostic Library. A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*, Leiden 2000 (5 vols).
- 18 For Irenaeus and Plotinus, see Broek 1996, pp. 57–66, 4–7 respectively, and, especially, Tardieu 1996.
- 19 These distinctions cannot be quantified because the beginning and end of too many texts have been lost.
- 20 The reasons for these problems are set out clearly in Shaked 2002, pp. 266–71.
- 21 For Simmel's life and an overview of his works, see Coser 1971, pp. 177–215; for Simmel's ideas on secrecy, see also Nedelmann 1995.

- 22 The most helpful analysis of Simmel's importance in this respect is Kippenberg 1991, pp. 419–20.
- 23 Bok 1982, ch. 8, which discusses accountability.
- 24 This part of the paper is partly based on De Jong 2005.
- 25 In general, temples were not places of communal worship, but the dwelling-places (homes) of the gods. In different traditions, they could fulfill different functions and they therefore show differences in the degree to which they let in the common people. In Mesopotamia, the common people as a rule did not enter the temple (Bottéro 2001, p. 118), whereas Greek temples appear to have been more easily accessible.
- 26 Most famously the ritual of the New Year in Babylon in the first millennium BCE: Toorn 1989.
- 27 The Mesopotamian evidence is discussed in Borger 1957–71.
- 28 The corpus of sites, monuments, and inscriptions of Vermaseren 1956–60 is seriously out of date, but has not been replaced. For a general introduction, see Claus 2000; for a bibliography from 1984 to 2004, see Martens and de Boe 2004.
- 29 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* (a.k.a. *The Golden Ass*) 11.23, describes how the main character in the novel, Lucius, had to borrow money in order to acquire all that was necessary for his final initiation. See Griffiths 1975 for the text.
- 30 An excellent study of this process is Bremmer 1995a.
- 31 See Smith 2003, for a powerful presentation of the lasting importance of domestic religion in the Ancient World. A wide-ranging case study is given by Toorn 1996.
- 32 The variety of priesthoods is so enormous that it is virtually impossible to make general statements on the subject. The essays in Beard and North 1990 will provide the necessary corrections to the image sketched here.
- 33 Some scholars therefore refer to most religions of the ancient world (significantly with the exception of Iran) as being part of a "Near-Eastern-Mediterranean *koinē*" ("common speech or common culture"). See, most recently, Burkert 2004, pp. 1–15.
- 34 For Pythagoras, see Burkert 1972; for Empedocles, Kingsley 1995.
- 35 The writings of Kingsley 1999 (on Parmeneides) and 2003 (on Empedocles and Parmeneides) are extremely useful to gain a sense of what it *meant* to people in antiquity to be thus induced into important truths, but alongside the obvious historical scholarly merits of these works, they also consciously attempt to open ways of appropriating these truths for modern seekers.
- 36 Wulff 1991, pp. 61–88, is a good overview of the "deliberate facilitation of religious experience," but only tells half the story. For a very sensitive case-study, focusing on the concept of "appropriation," see Hijweege 2004.
- 37 See, for instance, the discussion of Empedocles' promise to his pupil Pausanias that he would teach him to control the weather and to bring the life-force of a dead man back from Hades (Empedocles, fragment 111) in Kingsley 1995, pp. 217–27.
- 38 Lamberton 1995; Stroumsa 1996, pp. 11–26. An instructive modern parallel can be found in Luhrmann 1989, which discusses the ways in which contemporary neo-pagan groups in London conceal the contents of their rituals and ideas in order to keep them from sceptical inquiry. Her interpretation is based on the notion that the "outside world" will by definition destroy the truth claims of the various groups because they do not live up to modern scientific reasoning. That scenario is not wholly applicable to the Ancient World, but it is not wholly unimaginable either, as the success of Christian attacks against "pagan" traditions and conventions shows. For a relevant critique of Luhrmann's approach to the subject, see Hutton 1999, pp. 374–76.

- 39 For introductions to this literature and to the Hermetic movement, see Copenhagen 1992 and Broek 1996, pp. 1–21.
- 40 Recent studies of the most likely social and ritual backgrounds of these texts are Södergård 2003 and Peste 2002.
- 41 Porphyrius, *De Antro Nympharum*.
- 42 See especially Fowden 1986, pp. 120–26, and Stolzenberg 1999.
- 43 The phrase was famously found in the Armenian *Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* 9.4 (for which, see Mahé 2000).
- 44 See Broek 2000 for a good analysis.
- 45 Stroumsa 1996, pp. 147–68, with references.
- 46 For the text, see Meyer 1987, pp. 51–59.
- 47 For this typology, see Burkert 1987, pp. 30–53.
- 48 Tertullian, *De corona militis* 15; see Merkelbach 1984, pp. 95–96 for a discussion of the ritual.
- 49 The subject is critically discussed by Williams 1999; see also Williams 1996, pp. 96–115.

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