

Reason, faith and gnosis: three knowledge systems and their struggle for hegemony in the course of European history – *Wouter Hanegraaff (Religious Studies), University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)*

I will be discussing the suggestion, first made by the specialist of gnosticism Gilles Quispel, that the development of Western culture rests on three essential pillars: “reason”, “faith” and “gnosis”. The assumption was that the traditions of rationality and science, and of Jewish and Christian religion, are not sufficient to account for the complexity of Western culture, because traditions based upon gnosis (Greek for “knowledge”, originally meaning an intuitive, inner knowledge of the self and of God) have exerted a significant influence as well, but cannot be reduced to reason or faith.

The “three pillar” thesis is suggestive and thought-provoking, but contains a number of potential theoretical and methodological pitfalls. I will discuss the question of whether these can be avoided, and if so, how. Against that background I will provide a short introduction to the academic study of Western esotericism: a newly emerging discipline (see www.esswe.org) based upon critical historical research into the very currents and ideas that Quispel associated with “gnosis”. As will be seen, the study of esotericism is not just interesting in and for itself, but challenges some of the most basic assumptions about the foundations of Western culture that still tend to be taken for granted in academic research.