

The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation

of

**Noel Putnik**

entitled

**Obtinere Mentem Divinam: The Spiritual Anthropology of Cornelius Agrippa**

will be held on

Tuesday, 9 January 2018, at 11:30

in the

**Senate Room – Monument Building**

**Central European University (CEU)**

**Nádor u.9, Budapest**

Examination Committee

Chair Matthias Riedl (Department of History – CEU)

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György Geréby (Department of Medieval Studies – CEU), associate supervisor

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The doctoral dissertation is available for inspection on the CEU e-learning site.

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**Summary of the Doctoral Dissertation**

My dissertation is a study of the literary work and thought of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), a German humanist most famous for his reputation as a magician. Along with Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Lodovico Lazzarelli and many others, Agrippa belonged to the type of humanists who sought to reform or “enrich” Christianity by introducing elements from various heterodox philosophical and spiritual traditions. Agrippa himself was most fervently dedicated to the study of magic, in which he recognized an ancient wisdom tradition compatible with the genuine spirit of Christian teachings. The result of his lifelong studies was his well-known encyclopedia of magic, *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (Three books of occult philosophy), in which he presented and discussed practically all the forms of occult knowledge known in his time.

On the other hand, Agrippa was actively engaged in the religious controversies and theological debates of his time, taking sides with Biblical humanists such as Erasmus and closely following the emergence of Martin Luther’s movement and other Reformation groups. This other major field of his interest resulted in the production of non-magical works either of skeptical-devotional character, such as his famous declamation *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium* (On the uncertainty and vanity of sciences and arts), or of theological and exegetical nature, such as his less known treatises *De originali peccato* (On the original sin) and *Dialogus de homine* (A dialogueon man). Taken in its entirety and at its face value, Agrippa’s literary opus reveals an author with incoherent and sometimes mutually conflicting attitudes. Reading his works suggests a tense coexistence of a Hermetic magus who relies on personal initiative for gaining supernatural powers and a Christian humanist devoted to the principle of *sola fide*. Agrippa’s apparently inconsistent religious and philosophical convictions still remain a considerable hermeneutic challenge. The existing scholarly interpretations of this problem are usually based on two types of dichotomy perceived in his thought: that of Agrippa’s skepticism versus his religious devotion, and that of Agrippa’s involvement in the occult versus his self-proclaimed adherence to Christian orthodoxy.

In my dissertation I revisit the second dichotomy, that of Agrippa’s dedication to the theory and practice of magic vis-à-vis his religious self-identification as a pious and devoted Christian. More precisely, I examine a hybrid notion that Agrippa attempted to articulate and defend against his critics: that of a pious Christian magician, which is how he fashioned himself in some of his writings. My dissertation is a further development of the ideas delineated in my MA thesis, in which I analyzed Agrippa’s magical doctrines and argued that they were based on the notion of spiritual ascension or deification—in other words, that they were eminently religious in nature.

In my work I focus on the apparently Pelagian character of Agrippa’s understanding of ascension, especially when considered in relation to the other, supposedly orthodox side of his thought. I approach the problem by analyzing Agrippa’s works in the perspective of his anthropology and with the idea that his views on man can help us clarify his ambiguous position in the intellectual history of the early sixteenth-century Europe. I start off with the presumption that Agrippa’s anthropology is a meeting point between the magical and Christian sides of his thought. By anthropology I imply a complex set of beliefs, notions, and doctrines concerning issues such as the self, personhood, the relations between body and soul, etc. that governed Agrippa’s understanding of the phenomena he dealt with in his writings. Thus, my main research questions can be formulated as follows: what, according to Agrippa, constitutes the human being? How does he understand the relations between body and soul? What is Agrippa’s attitude towards the physical body, which plays a crucial role in the Christian doctrine of salvation? What is man’s position within the created world and with regard to the transcendental realm and God? How did man get to the created world and how does he leave it? Finally, what do Agrippa’s anthropological views tell us about his religious self-identification? Can they shed more light on the problem of his evident heterodoxy and self-proclaimed orthodoxy?

The main sources for my examination are Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia* and three smaller treatises that have so far received little scholarly attention, although they are of paramount importance for understanding Agrippa’s anthropology. These are *De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* (On the three ways of knowing God), the unfinished *Dialogus de homine* (A dialogue on man), and Agrippa’s only surviving exegetical work, *De originali peccato* (On the original sin). Occasionally, I also take into consideration Agrippa’s second major work, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium*, as well as small parts of his huge surviving correspondence. To my knowledge, none of these works has been systematically analyzed in the context of Agrippa’s anthropology and I hope that my dissertation will contribute to filling in that gap in the pertinent scholarship.

The methodology applied in this work is twofold: the first step consists in a careful philological analysis of the passages from the above-mentioned works which are of relevance for my research questions. I am particularly interested in Agrippa’s terminological choices and the meanings with which he loads the chosen terms, especially with regard to his sources of references, both synchronic and diachronic. In other words, I provide a comparative perspective by juxtaposing the texts I analyze with those that Agrippa drew on in his own search, ranging from the earliest (such as Plato’s) to the more or less contemporary texts (such as Ficino’s and Lazzarelli’s).

The second step consists in developing an interpretation of Agrippa’s anthropological views based on the analyzed texts and within the conceptual framework of the academic study of Western esotericism as a newly emerged branch of religious studies. Finally, this leads to an interpretation of Agrippa’s religious self-identification and the problem of his orthodoxy, which I address by proposing a polyvalent notion of piety and a tripartite model of Christianity.

Throughout my analysis I take into consideration what I call a “linguistic turn” in the present-day scholarship on Agrippa: an increased awareness and recognition of his literary and rhetorical strategies, especially his nuanced and intentionally ambiguous style of writing and argumentation based on his conviction that the true, inner knowledge should be concealed and protected from the unqualified or malevolent readers.

The main body of the dissertation is divided into five chapters. In Chapter One I provide a necessary historical introduction with an emphasis on those aspects of Agrippa’s life and writings that I examine more closely. In this chapter I also give a detailed overview of the relevant scholarship and discuss my own approach and methodology with regard to the main research questions. In Chapter Two I scrutinize the basic tenets of Agrippa’s cosmology and cosmogony with the idea that they are intrinsically linked to Agrippa’s views on man’s nature and his ontological status, in tune with the well-known Renaissance idea of the correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Chapters Three and Four form the core of my analysis of Agrippa’s anthropological ideas. In Chapter Three I argue that Agrippa articulated his views on man in two triads: that of soul, body, and spirit, and that of sensitive soul, rational soul, and the mind. I analyze each of the triads in the context of perceived tensions between the anthropological monism peculiar to the orthodox Christianity and the anthropological dualism more closely related to the Neoplatonic and Hermetic paradigms. In Chapter Four I apply the results of my analysis to Agrippa’s magical theory with the idea of elucidating the mechanisms lying behind different types of magic. I argue that his magical theory is intrinsically tied to his religious self-identification. Finally, in Chapter Five I examine Agrippa’s ideas on man’s fall and salvation, mostly on the basis on his treatises *De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* and *De originali peccato*. In my analysis of the latter, which is Agrippa’s only extant exegetical work, I demonstrate how the German humanist interpreted the Biblical account of the fall in the predominantly Hermetic conceptual framework. In the end, I use the results of my analysis to focus on the problem of Agrippa’s religious self-identification and offer a new interpretation of the tense coexistence between the two sides of his eclectic thought.

Based on my examination, I come to the following conclusions, which are here delineated in a necessarily simplified form:

1.Agrippa’s views on man, his origin, ontology, and eschatology are crucially determined by the Neoplatonic and Hermetic paradigms, which are based on anthropological dualism. Man’s true identity is in the transcendental realm, where he coexists with God as an immortal, spiritual entity partaking of the divine virtues and powers. In other words, man is not different from the divine mind or *mens*. Alternately, Agrippa calls him the “inner” or the “essential” man.

2. The fall of man, which appears to coincide with the emanation of the created world, takes place as the emanation of the mind itself: within the created world, it projects itself into the celestial *ratio* (or the rational soul) and the semi-earthly *idolum* (or the sensitive soul). Whereas *mens* remains in the transcendental realm, *ratio* and *idolum* are joined to the physical body and thus form the earthly man, unaware of his transcendental origin. Agrippa calls him the “external” man.

3. This scheme gives Agrippa the grounds for defining the nature of spiritual ascension: it means nothing else but the reverse process, whereby *ratio* and *idolum* are united to the divine *mens* and thus to God himself. Adopting the formulation from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Agrippa refers to it as the process of obtaining the mind (*obtinere mentem*). Through this process, man regains his prelapsarian state along with his lost divine powers. However, the process also requires the abandonment of the physical body, which is seen in the traditional dualist perspective, that is, as a *carcer animi* or *sōma sēma*.

4. Such a view on man is evidently incompatible with Christian anthropology as first theologically articulated by the apostle Paul. Thus, perhaps the only way to account for Agrippa’s self-proclaimed orthodoxy is to conclude that he construed Christianity in ways radically different from the theological benchmark of the Church. In my view, he conflated the Hermetic and Christian notions of piety and developed a nuanced, polyvalent view on Christianity, based on the primacy of gnosis, or direct personal revelation, which transcends the boundaries of religious traditions and ultimately abandons the exclusivity of the Christian religion itself. Along the lines of Marsilio Ficino’s *prisca theologia*, Agrippa attempted to build, promote, and defend the heterodox notion of a “pious Christian magician.”

Based on the standpoint that anthropology can serve as one of the best litmus tests for determining one’s spiritual allegiance, my main conclusion is that Agrippa’s hybrid religious identity is clearly reflected in his anthropological ideas and beliefs. I hope that in my analysis I managed to validate the above conclusions and that my dissertation will thus make a contribution to the steadily growing scholarship on Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim.

**Curriculum Vitae**

**Studies**

2009– PhD in Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary (supervisors: György E. Szőnyi, György Geréby);

2006–2007 MA in Medieval Studies, Central European University Budapest, Hungary;

1996–2004 BA and MA in Classics, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade University, Belgrade, Serbia;

**Awards and academic achievements**

2011 Statement of Proficiency in Medieval Latin – Level Two, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto;

2010 Academic Achievement Award for First-Year Doctoral Students, Central European University;

2007 CEU Academic Pro-Rector’s Excellence Award;

2007 CEU Outstanding Academic Achievement Award;

1999–2000 Scholarship of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Belgrade (for the best 1000 undergraduate students in Serbia);

**Conferences and other academic events relevant to the Dissertation**

2016 The Second International CEENASWE Conference *Esotericism, Literature and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe*, Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University, Belgrade, Serbia (May 27–28);

2014 The First International CEENASWE Conference *Western Esotericism in East-Central Europe over the Centuries*, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary (July 4–5);

## 2013 The Fourth International ESSWE Conference Western Esotericism and Health, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden (June 26–29);

2011 International Conference *Obscuritаs in the Middle Ages*, Faculty of Humanities and Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, the Czech Republic (October 6–8);

2011 The Third International ESSWE Conference Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary (July 6–10);

2011 Graduate Student Conference *Science and Magic: Ways of Knowing in the Early Modern World*, Princeton University, Princeton, USA (April 29–30);

2010 Workshop *Spiritualism, Esotericism, Early Modern Culture*, (Organizer: György E. Szőnyi), Faculty of Arts, University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary (November 25–26);

2010 Summer University in Religious Studies *Messianism – Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Directors: Michael L. Miller, Matthias Riedl), Central European University, Budapest, Hungary (July 5–15);

**Published works relevant to the Dissertation**

**Book**:

*The Pious Impiety of Agrippa’s Magic: Two Conflicting Notions of Ascension in the Works of Cornelius Agrippa* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010);

**Articles/book chapters:**

“Agrippa’s Cosmic Ladder: Building a World with Words in the *De Occulta Philosophia*,” in *Lux in tenebris: the Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism*, ed. Peter J. Forshaw (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 81–102;

“*Plato Ficinianus*: jedan renesansni primer recepcionističke kritike” [*Plato Ficinianus*: A Renaissance Example of Reader-Response Criticism], *Lucida intervalla, A Journal of Classical Studies*, Vol. 43(2014): 165–94;

“To Be Born (Again) from God: Scriptural Obscurity as a Doctrinal Way Out for Cornelius Agrippa,” in *Obscurity in Medieval Texts*, ed. Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider, Alessandro Zironi, (Medium Aevum Quotidianum, Sonderband 30: Krems, 2013), 153–63;

Мarsilio Ficino, *Argumentum ad Platonis Ionem*, Serbian translation with an introduction and notes, in: Platon, *Ijon*, tr. Divna Stevanović-Soleil (Belgrade: Fedon, 2010), 115–37;

“Two Apparently Conflicting Notions of Ascension in the Works of Agrippa von Nettesheim,” *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 14 (2008): 121–36;

“Kornelije Agripa i Johan Tritemije: teološka odbrana magije” [Cornelius Agrippa and Johannes Trithemius: a theological defense of magic], *Koraci,* *A Journal of Humanities and Arts*, Vol. 38 (2008): 98–103;