

Claudio Moreschini. *Hermes Christianus: The Intermingling of Hermetic Piety and Christian Thought*.

Trans. Patrick Baker. *Cursor Mundi* 8. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011. xii + 306 pp. €80. ISBN: 978-2-503-52960-8.

If Claudio Moreschini's extensive scholarship has been somewhat neglected by anglophone readers in the past, this exemplary collaboration between the author and his translator, Patrick Baker, should now help to put that omission right. Moreschini's survey of the several writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus

brings order to an unwieldy reception history. It covers their status in antiquity, their medieval afterlife, their rediscovery in the Renaissance, and the challenges to their authenticity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

In taking the long view, Moreschini faces some obvious hurdles, as he compares interpretations that are separated by several centuries and by deep shifts in outlook. In each case he tries to present sympathetically what each writer drew from the Hermetic texts, with copious quotations and sensitive analysis. An important new emphasis is given to the voice of Lactantius, whose positive assessment of Hermetic thought counterbalances the more familiar strictures of St. Augustine.

As a corrective to older views, Moreschini brings us up to date with research that confirms the Egyptian roots of Hermetism. These roots were subsequently modified by their reception in a Hellenistic age — famously characterised by E. R. Dodds as the “age of anxiety” — giving us the texts we now call Hermetic. Moreschini illustrates the Platonic character of some passages and the proto-Christian flavor of others, calling the culture that gave rise to the texts “a form of religiosity typical of the great masses of persons at the middle level of culture who were of various stock and of a precarious social condition and who inhabited the metropolises of the Hellenistic and Roman East” (8). This is quite far from the privileged insight into priestly practices that Renaissance interpreters like Ficino imagined in the texts. But Moreschini helps to bridge that gap with explanations of the character of the works in his introductory chapter. He follows Eugenio Garin in linking the practical knowledge of medicine, magic, and alchemy found in some Hermetic texts to the philosophical and theosophical character of others. Revelation, salvation, transcendence, and rebirth all have their place, together with a dualism between God and matter in which man plays a unique role by virtue of his position between the two. The tradition as a whole is thus considered a *paideia*, a preparation whose last steps consist in bestowing a form of gnosis on the initiate, allowing him a divine rebirth.

For readers of this journal, the most important section of the book will be that dealing with the Renaissance, and here Moreschini does not disappoint. In his section on Ficino (the bulk of chapter 4), he examines Hermes’s place in the different versions of the *prisca theologia*. He lays out Ficino’s early use of medieval Hermetic texts as a support for Platonism even before he knew any Greek or became acquainted with the Pimander. Thereafter, Ficino’s enthusiasm was undimmed, as he saw in Hermes a prophet who had glimpsed the mystery of Christian revelation before the advent of Christ. Moreschini takes issue with recent views (e.g., of Michael Allen and Brian Copenhaver) that have posited a decline in Ficino’s support for Hermetic doctrines over time, even though he admits a livelier enthusiasm in Lazzarelli’s work, which is also treated to an extended discussion. Lazzarelli, in transports of religious rapture, sees man’s role as the creation of divine souls, just as God creates angels (177). Whether this means the creation of demons through the practice of magic or a Kabbalistic creation of souls as evinced by Wouter Hanegraaff is subject to debate (178), and Lazzarelli’s additional reliance on the Talmud, *Zohar*, and *Sefer Yetzirah* are noted through a contribution by Enrico

Norelli (183–85). Even the poet Michael Marullus turns out to be a Hermetic enthusiast in his valuation of eternity as a god (185).

From Italy the tale moves to France and François Foix-Candale's edition of and commentary on the Pimander (chapter 5). The final forty pages are reserved for a review of Steuco and Patrizzi, followed by the undermining of the authority of Hermetism on religious grounds by Genebrard, Angelucci, Baronius, and finally Isaac Casaubon, who added the tools of philology to his confessional opposition. Surprisingly omitted from the otherwise helpful bibliography are the two recent translations of Clement Salaman (*Way of Hermes* and *Asclepius*). However, in its collection and analysis of Hermetic material, this book constitutes an important resource.

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