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## Moses as Go-Between: John Spencer's Theory of Religious Translation

### Introduction

To present Moses as a go-between in the context of a volume on Renaissance go-betweens may seem an unlikely proposition – after all, the Moses of the Bible, if he ever lived at all, cannot have been alive during the Renaissance. My only excuse is that I am dealing with Moses as he was conceived of by Dr. John Spencer, who lived from 1630 until 1693. In his monumental work *De Legibus Hebraeorum Ritualibus*, Spencer presented Moses as a figure between two worlds, the Hebrew world in which he was born and to which he eventually returned, and the Egyptian world in which he was educated.<sup>1</sup> This sounds very much like the Biblical Moses; Spencer's Moses, however, did not simply return to his people, but brought and taught them what he had learned in the Egyptian mysteries. His legislation amounts to a translation of Egyptian 'hieroglyphical' wisdom into Hebrew Law. This is what made him a genuine go-between.

Spencer's Egyptian genealogy of Biblical religion calls to mind the writings of Freud, who also held that Moses took his monotheism from Egypt. And in fact, John Spencer was himself a go-between. He stood between the world of the theological tradition of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the world of free-thought, i.e. deism and freemasonry, of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and in an even wider perspective, he stands, as we shall see, between Maimonides, the Jewish philosopher of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and Sigmund Freud, the Jewish theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In his own time, Spencer held an uncontested position as a dean of Ely and prefector of Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, and was never, to the best

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<sup>1</sup> John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earumque rationibus libri tres* (Cambridge 1685). I am using the second edition (The Hague, 1686) and the enlarged third edition, which appeared 1732 at Tübingen, containing a biography of Spencer and a survey of critical objections to Spencer's theory.

of my knowledge, suspected of heterodoxy. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, he was reclaimed by deists, freemasons and other representatives of freethought as a pioneering and groundbreaking predecessor, one who, in deriving the Mosaic Legislation from the Egyptian mysteries, replaced the idea of revelation with the concept of translation. My own first encounter with Spencer's work was strongly determined by this perspective. I met with his name in a masonic treatise by the philosopher Carl Leonhard Reinhold, published in 1787, a book which turned out to be the model for Schiller's fascinating essay *The Legation of Moses*, which in fact anticipates Freud's thesis that what Moses taught the Hebrews was an Egyptian religion.<sup>2</sup> To put it briefly, Reinhold argues that the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Biblical Jehova (this is how he spells the Tetragrammaton) is one and the same deity, and that Biblical monotheism is a straight copy – a bad and reductive copy at that – of the Egyptian mysteries. The name 'Jehova' means, according to Reinhold, 'He who is' or 'Essential Being', and God reveals himself as such to Moses saying 'I am who I am'; this is a copy of Isis' revelation – in the famous inscription on the 'veiled image' as rendered by Plutarch and Proclus – that she is 'All that is, was, and will be', or in other words, 'Essential Being'. Thus Moses took everything from Egypt, whose wisdom he had learned when he was educated as a prince at the Pharaonic court, and turned it into the monotheistic religion of the Hebrews, reducing the sublime deity of the mysteries, the All-and-One, to the national god of the Jews. Rather than revelation, then, we are dealing with translation. For this revolutionary or at least heretical thesis, Reinhold quotes two authorities: Rabbi Ben Maimon and Dr. Spencer. Given the fact that Reinhold based his conclusions on Spencer and Maimonides, and may, via Schiller, in turn have influenced Freud, we can discern a line of tradition leading from the 12<sup>th</sup> century up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Spencer as a hinge between medieval Jewish philosophy and modern psycho-history.

Spencer held that Moses learned everything in the Egyptian mysteries and that the Ritual laws which Moses instituted were just borrowed from Egyptian ritual and its 'hieroglyphs'. However, Spencer never goes so far as to postulate that Moses took his monotheistic concept of God from the Egyptians; in fact, he does not deal with Egyptian theology at all. It is not the content of mystery religion which interests Spencer. According to him, it was the *structure* of the Egyptian religion that Moses copied, a structure which Spencer reconstructed as double-faced, divided into the inner and the outer, esotericism and exotericism. Spencer was convinced that it was God's specific plan for Moses to learn this structure of a double religion (*religio duplex*) from the Egyptian mysteries; only after being 'nourished with the hieroglyphic literature of

2 Carl Leonhard Reinhold, *Die Hebräischen Mythen oder die älteste religiöse Freymaurerey*, ed. with a commentary by Jan Assmann (Neckargemünd: Edition Mnemosyne, 2001).

Egypt' (*hieroglyphicis Aegypti literis innutritum*) was Moses in a position to be chosen as God's first prophet. 'God wished', Spencer says, 'that Moses should write the mystic images of the more sublime things. The hieroglyphic literature, in which Moses was educated, was fairly convenient for this purpose.'<sup>3</sup> What else could have been the reason for the long sojourn of the children of Israel in Egypt? What else the reason for the complicated strategy of smuggling a Hebrew child into the Pharaonic family and having him educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), that is, initiated into the Egyptian mysteries? Evidently, God wanted to give the Jews a religion that was as double-faced as that of the Egyptians: to quote Spencer again, 'carnal only in frontispiece, but divine and wonderful in its interior in order to accomodate his institutions to the taste and usage of the time lest his Law and cult should seem deficient in anything transmitted in the name of wisdom.'<sup>4</sup>

For Spencer, it is this concept of a mystery religion that provides the strongest parallels between Egypt and Israel – the religion of the Old Testament, he states, is a mystery religion too. He substantiates this thesis with two distinct and distant quotations from Clement of Alexandria, which he combines into a coherent whole:

The Egyptians indicated the really sacred logos which they kept in the innermost sanctuary of Truth by what they called Adyta, and the Hebrews (indicated it) by means of the curtain (in the temple). Therefore, as far as concealment is concerned, the secrets (ainigmata) of both the Hebrews and the Egyptians are very similar to each other.<sup>5</sup>

These were the points which Reinhold adopted from Spencer's work: first, that the Jewish religion was a mystery religion or, in his words, 'the oldest freemasonry', and secondly, that, in this respect, it was a straight copy of Egyptian religion. Under the surface of the Jewish laws, just as under the surface of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, there is an esoteric doctrine of truth. Another of Spencer's quotations, which he adduces in order to prove the esoteric character of Biblical religion, is taken from Eusebius:

Moses ordered the Jewish plebs to be committed to all of the rites which were included in the words of their laws. But he wished that the others, whose mind and

3 See Spencer, 157: *Deum voluisse ut Moses mystica rerum sublimiorum simulacra scriberet, eo quod huiusmodi scribendi ratio, literaturae, qua Moses institutus erat, hieroglyphicae non parum conveniret.*

4 Spencer, *De legibus*, 157: *aequum est opinari, Deum religionem, carnalem quidem in frontispicio, sed divinam et mirandam in penetranti, Judaeis tradidisse, ut instituta sua ad seculi gustum et usum accomodaret.*

5 Spencer combines two distant passages from Clement's *stromata* book V: cap. III, 19.3 and cap. VI, 41.2, see Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata Buch I-VI*, ed. Otto Stählin, 4th ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1985), 338 and 354; Reinhold, *Hebräische Mysieren*, 83, quotes the same sentences, obviously after Spencer, *De legibus*.

virtue were stronger as they were liberated from this exterior shell, should accustom themselves to a philosophy more divine and superior to common man, and should penetrate with the eye of the mind into the higher meaning of the laws.<sup>6</sup>

Reinhold not only quotes this passage, he makes it a motto to one of his chapters, giving the text neither in Eusebius' Greek nor in his own translation, but in Spencer's Latin paraphrase. This detail shows again how much he relies on Spencer. Reading Spencer with Reinhold's eyes, it was hardly avoidable to read Reinhold's conclusions into Spencer's text. It was all already there, and any crown of revolutionary innovation would have to be accorded to Spencer, not to Reinhold, who was just an epigone. The only difference between Spencer and Reinhold was that Spencer restricted the equation of Egyptian and Biblical religion to ritual structure whereas Reinhold extended it to cover theological content too.

There is certainly a Reinhold side in Spencer's text that makes it seem a revolutionary breakthrough in the history of enlightenment, pointing forward to Sigmund Freud and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but there is an equally strong Maimonides side pointing backward to the Middle Ages. It is this doublefacedness of Spencer's book that makes it a go-between.

## Normative Inversion

Having briefly dealt with Spencer's Reinhold side, let us now turn, equally briefly, to Spencer's Maimonides side. It is from Maimonides that Spencer takes his project of 'explaining' the ritual laws of the Hebrews – *et earum rationibus*. In his *Moreh Nevuchim*, Maimonides embarks on the project of what in Rabbinical tradition is called *ta'amej ha-mizvot*, explaining the laws, and even extending this project beyond moral and juridical law, *mizvot* and *mishpatim*, to ritual law or *hukkim*, which, in the Jewish tradition, was held to

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6 *Judaeorum plebem quidem, ritibus omnibus quomodo Legum ipsarum verbis concepti erant, Moses obstrictam, teneri iussit. Caeteros autem, quorum mens esset virtusque firmior, cum eo cortice liberatos esse, tum ad diviniorem aliquam et homini vulgo superiorem Philosophiam assuescere, & in altiore Legum earum sensum mentis oculo penetrare, voluit.* (*Praep. Evang.* I. 7 cap. 10, p.m. 378. Spencer, 156.) I had a hard time verifying this passage in a modern edition of the *Praeparatio Evangelica*; what I eventually came up with reads as follows: 'Now, after having perused the commandments of the sacred laws, the allegorical mode of symbolism it employs, there is even more to be signalized. Dividing the Jewish people into two classes, the Logos subjected the masses to the explicit commandments in their literal sense (*kata tēn rhētēn dianoian*), but liberated the other class, the experts, from this literal application, in order to attach themselves to a more divine philosophy, superior to the many and to (pay attention) with a theoretical mind (*theoria*) to the higher meaning of the laws.' (*Praeparatio Evangelica* VIII 10, 18; Karl Mraz (ed.), *Die Werke Eusebius 8, Die Praeparatio Evangelica I*, [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1982], 454).

be inexplicable, without reason, so that it was, in fact, forbidden to seek for its reasons. This traditional Jewish view was impossible for a rationalist philosopher like Maimonides to accept. God was not to be conceived of as a tyrannical, arbitrary legislator, but must have had his reasons to give his people all these seemingly inexplicable laws. If there are no rational reasons to be found, the laws must be explained historically. In his search for historical circumstances, Maimonides became a – perhaps even the first – historian of religion, discovering the 'Zabians' as exponents of 'paganism', a forgotten world-religion which once formed the historical and religious environment of the Jewish people. His idea was that God was condescending enough to take this historical context into consideration when giving His people the Law, so that He adapted His laws to the customs and the cognitive capacity of the Jews of that time, who were totally assimilated to pagan religion, that is, to innumerable rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies. This was why the religion he gave them contained as many rituals, sacrifices and ceremonial prescriptions as pagan idolatry, but in a form that would slowly turn their mind in the direction of true worship, knowledge and justice. In order to understand the ceremonial laws (*khukkim*<sup>7</sup>), therefore, it is necessary to study paganism. Thus, Maimonides became the founder of the discipline which flourished in the seventeenth century and to which Spencer's work made a particularly important contribution: the study of paganism, or 'paganology'.

Maimonides anticipated Spencer's approach in postulating a relationship between pagan and biblical religion and in defining this relationship as one of model and copy: for Maimonides, pagan or 'Zabian' religion was the model for the ritual laws of the Bible. The only difference is that Maimonides defined this relationship as *inversion*, whereas Spencer defined it as *translation*. For Maimonides, the ritual laws of the Bible inverted the sacrificial rites of the Zabians. If the Zabians prohibited the slaughtering of rams and bulls, because the ram was the sacred animal of Amun and the bull the sacred animal of Osiris, the Apis bull, the law prescribed the sacrificial slaughtering of precisely these animals. If the Zabians practised the rite of boiling the kid in the milk of its mother and sprinkling trees and bushes with the milk in order to ensure fertility, the law prohibited the cooking of meat and milk together. Since there was little known about the Zabians and their sacrificial rites, Maimonides was free to reconstruct (or invent) them just by inverting the Biblical laws, turning Biblical prohibitions into Zabian prescriptions and vice-versa.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The Law is divided into *mitsvot*, *mishpatim*, and *khukkim* or, in Thomas Aquinas' translation, *moralia*, *judicialia* and *caeremonialia*.

<sup>8</sup> He took his knowledge about the Zabians/Sabeans/Sabaeans from a book by the tenth-century author Ibn Wahshiyya on Nabataean agriculture (arab. *al-filâha al-nabatiyya*, hebr. *ha-avoda ha-nabati*), whose title was often referred to in Latin translations as *De agricultura* (or *ser-*

Stephen Nettles, in his answer to John Seldon, Oxford 1625, characterizes this principle as follows: 'Moses Ben Maimon in More Hanebucim writes that the end for which sacrifices were commanded did tend especially to the rooting out of idolatry: for whereas the Gentiles worshipped beasts, as the Chaldaeans and Aegyptians bullocks and sheep, with reference to the Celestiall Signes, Aries and Taurus, etc., therefore (saith he) God commanded these to be slaine in sacrifice'.<sup>9</sup> Instead of Maimonides, however, Nettles could equally well have referred to Tacitus, who stated as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE that 'the Jews consider everything that we keep sacred as profane and permit everything that for us is taboo (*profana illic omnia quae apud nos sacra, rursum concessa apud illos quae nobis incesta*). In their temples they consecrate a statue of a donkey and sacrifice a ram in *contumeliam Ammonis* 'in order to ridicule the god Amun.' For the same reason, 'they sacrifice a bull because the Egyptians worship Apis.'<sup>10</sup> This is the principle of normative inversion, of which Tacitus not only gives the most concise definition but which he also presents with unmistakably anti-Jewish intentions. Normative inversion seems, in fact, to be a cliché of antique anti-Semitism, occurring in many descriptions of the Jews, and it is surprising to meet with this same principle in an authoritative Jewish author such as Maimonides. He sees in normative inversion a kind of withdrawal therapy and a mnemotechnique of forgetting. There is no intentional forgetting; the only way to get rid of a memory is by superinscription. The only way to make the children of Israel forget the idolatrous rites which they adopted in Egypt was to superinscribe them by similar laws in the opposite direction. The technique worked so well that the religion of the Zabians was altogether forgotten in the time when Maimonides tried to reconstruct it.

### Translation

500 years later, when Spencer took up Maimonides' project, he quite naturally equated Maimonides' Zabians with the ancient Egyptians. Unlike Maimonides, however, he did not simply reconstruct or invent the Egyptian rites as the opposite of the ritual laws of the Hebrews but collected a huge documentation on Egyptian rituals drawn mostly from Greek but also from Latin and Rabbinic sources. The richness of his sources is surprising; modern Egyptology has no idea of how much information about ancient Egyptian religion could be

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*vitio*: the Hebrew term *avodah* can have both meanings) *Aegyptiorum* (rather than *Nabathaeorum*). See Stroumsa, loc.cit., 16-17.

9 Stephen Nettles, *Answer to the Jewish Part of Mr. Selden's History of Tithes* (Oxford, 1625), 46-47, quoted after Stroumsa, loc.cit., 17.

10 *Historiae*, V, § 5.4 = Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors II*, 19 and 2.

gained simply from Greek and other sources, without any knowledge of the Egyptian script. Under the impact of this simply overwhelming documentation, Spencer felt compelled to complement the Maimonidean concept of normative inversion with its opposite which he termed '*translatio*' and '*mutatio*', translation and borrowing. The second of his three books is devoted to inversion, the third to translation.

This juxtaposition of two contradictory principles makes up the heterogeneous nature or 'inbetweenness' of Spencer's text. The 'inversion' part represents his Maimonides side, the 'translation' part his Reinhold side. Both, however, belong to his particular and very complex form of paganology. Spencer is in fact as far removed from the orthodox view of pagan religion which sees in it just a devilish imitation of Biblical religion<sup>11</sup>, as from the Renaissance idea of *prisca theologia*, which did not recognize any difference between Biblical and pagan religion, tradition, wisdom or 'theology' but knew of only One Great and common tradition of truth that had been transmitted by the ancient sages such as Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Zalmoxis, Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato.<sup>12</sup>

*Prisca theologia* was the prevailing paradigm during the Renaissance and was connected with names such as Gemisthos Plethon, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Agostino Steuco, Francesco Patrizi. With the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a new intellectual climate set in, based on a strict distinction between Christian and Pagan thought, in fact a complete restoration of what I proposed to call the 'Mosaic Distinction' between true and false religion. Now, Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegist appeared no longer as variants of one universal truth, but as the other, as representatives of pagan, oriental religions. Strangely enough, however, this excommunication of the oriental religions actually served to intensify the scholarly interest in them. This is the origin of early modern 'paganology', the study of pagan religions *as* pagan, foreign, different. This is the paradigm within which Spencer was working. When he speaks of *translatio*, he is thinking of crossing a border, bridging a gap. Translating Egyptian into Hebrew no longer means just a slight shift between variants within the same body of knowledge; it constitutes a transaction from one whole world to another. Egypt, for Spencer, is *the* other religion, the paragon of paganism and idolatry. Spencer characterizes Egyptian religion as the worst form of idolatry, indulging in medical metaphors such as '*faeces superstitionis*

<sup>11</sup> For this orthodox view, he refers to Pierre Daniel Huet, *Demonstratio Evangelica* (Paris, 1679).

<sup>12</sup> See Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathustra. Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1998; religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 42), cf. also Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis. Historische Umriss abendländischer Spiritualität in Antike, Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998).

*Aegyptiacae*, '*idolomaniae pestis*', '*impietatis Aegyptiacae lues*', '*pestis Aegyptiaca*' etc. and is careful to draw the distinction between idolatry and monotheism as emphatically as possible. The worlds of Egyptian idolatry and Hebrew monotheism, between which Moses was acting as a go-between, were thus strongly opposed to each other in Spencer's imagination. It is hardly conceivable how he himself could reconcile within his scholarly mind these two antagonistic images of Egypt: as the opposite of Biblical monotheism and at the same time as the origin and model of Biblical Law.

Spencer resolved this contradiction through his concept of double religion, distinguishing between exoteric and esoteric religion as well as between primary and secondary meanings of the ritual laws: the primary meaning functioned in its 'inversion' nature as a therapy against idolatry, the secondary meaning, by contrast, in its 'translation' nature as an adumbration of some higher truth, functioning in the same way as the Egyptian hieroglyphs. In practising this double semiotics, Spencer was following the model of Maimonides. According to Spencer, Maimonides distinguished between the literal and the mystical sense of the law, which he called '*verba duplicata*' or דברי כפלים (*divrej kfilayim*: 'words of reduplication').<sup>13</sup> This distinction functions as a leading principle in Spencer's work, where it appears as *rationes primariae* vs. *secundariae*. Maimonides introduced the distinction in order to explain the hidden historical reason for the ritual laws. Their function as a mnemotechnique of forgetting by superinscription of Zabian rites was, of course, concealed from the people – otherwise they would have had no reason to keep the laws once the Zabian religion had disappeared from history. Their mystical meaning upon which the timeless validity of the law is founded was accessible only to those sages who knew that the true God needs neither sacrifices nor ritual adoration. Maimonides therefore interpreted Judaism as a double or mystery religion, divided into an exoteric and an esoteric side, a view which Spencer fully accepted. The Zabian religion, however, was denied this duplicity. There was no mystery, no esotericism in Zabian religion. The Zabians practised their sacrificial rites in their literal meaning, in order to serve, to feed and to worship their gods; they had no deeper understanding, no knowledge of any esoteric significance to their rites. For Maimonides, the double-faced structure of mystery religion was the exclusive and distinctive feature of Judaism, a feature which put it on a plane above paganism. This is the main point where Spencer deviated from Maimonides. For Spencer, pagan, i.e. Egyptian religion was not only a mystery religion in the same way as Judaism and Christianity, it was the model for Biblical religion.

13 Spencer, *De legibus*, I, 155. Dr. Evgen Tarantul refers me to Jes 40,2 for the rare form *kfilayim*, 'reduplication', 'double' ('for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins'). Spencer's Hebrew is not punctuated. The adjective *kfulim*, 'double' corresponding to 'duplicata', requires, of course, *dvarim* instead of the *status constructus divrej*.

## Ritual and Theology: Spencer and Cudworth

Spencer had some ideas about the literal and the mystical meaning of the ritual laws of the Hebrews, but he never ventures an opinion on the mystical meaning of the Egyptian rites. The Reinhold side of his argumentation and the contradiction in his argument therefore remain latent. Had he cared for the higher meaning of Egyptian rites, symbols and hieroglyphs, he would have been compelled to accept the ideas of the *prisca theologia* tradition and to admit that the interior side of the Egyptian mysteries consisted in the same truth which Moses brought to the Hebrews. I think that we are dealing here with a case of conscious avoidance. During the same years when Spencer was working on his *De Legibus*, his colleague at Cambridge, Ralph Cudworth, professor regius of Hebrew at the university, finished and published his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, in which he reconstructed what he called the 'arcane theology' of ancient Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Cudworth, an important representative of the group of Cambridge platonists, presented in his *True Intellectual System* a modernized version of the Renaissance tradition of *Prisca theologia*, modernized in that he did full justice to the late dating of the Hermetic texts by Isaac Casaubon, who had shown that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not composed in or before the time of Moses, but in the 3rd century AD.<sup>15</sup> It is beyond the scope of this contribution to show how Cudworth managed to rescue Hermes Trismegistus from Casaubon's accusation of forgery and once again to build a natural theology on the foundation of Hermetism; suffice to say that he did so with tremendous success. All the sources he collected converged in the idea that God was 'One-and-All', *Hen kai Pan*, thus establishing that the esoteric monotheism of the Egyptians consisted in the philosophy of All-Oneness or pantheism. Spencer seems to have left to Cudworth the questions of theology, of polytheism and monotheism, occupying himself solely with ritual. His avoidance of these topics looks like a conscious division of labour. However,

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: The First Part, wherein All the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted; and its Impossibility Demonstrated* (London, 1678; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI. Ad Cardinalis Baronii prolegomena in annales* (London 1614), 70ff. See Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1964), 398-403. Yates does not deal with Cudworth and, therefore, underestimates the significance of the hermetic tradition in the later 17th and 18th centuries. Cf. Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text. The Tradition of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), 145-161.

as far as I can see, Spencer never refers to Cudworth's book.<sup>16</sup> Cudworth, in turn, left unmentioned the relation between Egyptian and Biblical religion and the question of how much Moses knew of Egyptian arcane theology. We should bear in mind that paganology and *prisca theologia* were opposite to each other, the one emphasizing, the other deconstructing the difference between religion and idolatry, monotheism and paganism. Cudworth's ideas were incompatible with Spencer's methods; but it was precisely the combination of the two which, in the eighteenth century, led to the intellectual revolution which I have illustrated with Reinhold and Schiller but which started, of course, much earlier.

It was above all William Warburton, who, some sixty years after Cudworth and Spencer, in his voluminous work on the Divine Legation of Moses, brought these two loose ends together, the arcane theology of the Egyptians and the monotheism of Moses. Basing himself on classical sources<sup>17</sup>, Warburton explained polytheism or idolatry as the political theology of paganism. The argument runs briefly as follows. Any pagan people, in the absence of immediate government by God, needs a politically supportive theology that has to fulfil two functions. Its first function was to establish civil morality and obedience to the laws, which nobody would follow if there was not the strong belief in gods punishing transgressors and rewarding the faithful, and which nobody, seeing the success of the wicked and the misfortunes of the righteous, would take seriously if there was not the belief in the immortality of the soul and therefore in reward and punishment in the hereafter. The second function of political theology was to reflect on the divine plane the distinctions and differences that constitute the socio-political world: the boundaries between peoples, cities, states and provinces, and the distinction between classes, clans and castes. Any society that aims at social order and political power is therefore bound to invent a pantheon of tutelary deities, turning meritorious law-givers, culture-founders, heroes, chiefs and kings into gods and assigning them functions in the supervision of the laws and the symbolisation of political and social identities. These gods are fiction, but a legitimate fiction, because they serve a good purpose. Fiction, in a pagan society, is indispensable, otherwise any justice and social order would collapse. Warburton, in his intention to defend his concept of pagan religion against the priestly fraud theory (*la trahison de clercs*, Fontenelle<sup>18</sup>) comes close to Nietzsche and his conception of

16 In vol. I, 271, note b, Spencer refers to Cudworth's treatise on the Eucharist, *A Discourse Concerning the True Notion of the Lord's Supper* (London, 1642), quoting its title in Latin.

17 The classical sources are the famous fragment of Critias, a passage in Cicero's *De natura deorum*, a passage in Livius on Numa Pompilius, and the well known statements of Lucretius about religion, all of them belonging to and representing the critique of religion in a typical antique Enlightenment tradition.

18 See Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

life-supportive illusions.

For this reason, all pagan religions are mystery religions. They are forced to keep secret the fictitious nature of their deities, a truth which, were it known, would overturn any political order. But this is not all; Warburton goes a step further and reconstructs an esoteric theology which amounts to much more than mere disillusionment. This esoteric theology is a theology of Nature. In the footsteps of Spencer and especially Cudworth, Warburton constructed the famous 'dual religion' hypothesis in a way that established a sharp antagonism between the esoteric and the exoteric side of religion, its natural and its political theology. This was his special contribution to the tradition and progress of paganology. From Clement of Alexandria, he took the distinction between 'lesser' and 'greater mysteries'. The lesser mysteries were still part of political theology and essentially a hieroglyphic encasement, designed to address the populace at large through symbolic icons, sensual rituals, and sacred animals. However, they disclosed their deeper signification only to those who proved able to understand their secret meaning, which generally consisted in teachings about the immortality of the soul and a future life where virtue would be rewarded and vice would be punished. The greater mysteries concern natural theology; they were administered only to the very few among the initiates who were chosen for kingship and whose minds and virtues were strong enough to withstand the truth. This truth was essentially negative: it consisted in abolishing the illusionary imagery of polytheism. According to Clement of Alexandria, this last and highest initiation led to a point where 'all teaching ends' (*ouden de manthanein hypoleipetai*). Discursive instruction stops and immediate vision takes over. 'The doctrines delivered in the Greater Mysteries are concerning the universe. Here all instruction ends. Things are seen as they are; and Nature, and the workings of Nature, are to be seen and comprehended.'<sup>19</sup> In the final stage of initiation, the adept is speechlessly confronted with Nature.

The distinction between the Greater Mysteries and official religion including the lesser mysteries corresponds to the distinction between truth and fiction, monotheism and idolatry. The difference between monotheism and paganism is transferred here into the realm of one single religion. No author dealing with the concepts of mystery religion and dual religion has ever gone so far. The relationship between political and natural theology has been constructed in the form of absolute contradiction and mutual negation. Warburton did not dare to draw the obvious conclusions, but his readers and especially

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UP, 1959), 47-53.

<sup>19</sup> Clem. Alex., *Strom.*, V.XI.17,1; William Warburton, *The divine legation of Moses demonstrated on the principles of a religious deist, from the omission of the doctrine of a future state of reward and punishment in the Jewish dispensation* (London: John Nicholls, 1738-1741; 2nd ed. London, 1778, repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1980), vol. I, 191.

Carl Leonhard Reinhold did. The borderline between truth and fiction was not marked by revelation, but by initiation. The truth has always been with the Egyptians, sheltered in the veil of the mysteries. All that Moses did after having been chosen for the throne of Egypt and initiated into the Greater mysteries was to return to his fellow Hebrews and reveal to them what he had learned in the mysteries.

One hundred years after Reinhold and two hundred years after Spencer, the same debate about the originality of Hebrew religion arose again, this time in connection with Babylonia rather than Egypt. The famous Bible/Babel controversy repeated the verdict that Biblical religion is just a copy of something else which, this time, was identified with Babylonian religion. In this context, the idea of translation was used as an argument against the Bible, which was seen as simply derivative of Babylonian tradition. This was not Spencer's problem. On the contrary, the fact that much of Biblical laws and rituals were taken from Egypt only heightened their interest and authority. It was God who led the children of Israel to Egypt and made them dwell there for a couple of centuries in order to teach them the Egyptian ways of double religion and *verba duplicata*. Egypt was a necessary stage in human education (*educatio generis humani*).

In closing, let me just acknowledge the sense in which Spencer's problem is still an open and much debated question. Spencer's problem was the double-facedness of the Bible, its relationship with its historical environment in terms of both 'inversion' and 'translation', or both 'antagonistic' and 'syncretistic' acculturation. 200 years after Spencer, the burning question was the 'Bible/Babel-debate', where one party claimed that the Bible was to a large degree derivative of Babylonian sources whereas the other party stressed its incomparable uniqueness. Today, Old Testament scholars debate whether their discipline is about the history of Israelite religion – which would be a history of translation and adaptation, the position held by the 'syncretism' party – or, rather, about the theology of the Old Testament, which would, then, be a theology of distinction, the view of the 'antagonism' party.

The Bible has indeed these two faces: it bears witness to the archaic and syncretistic religion of ancient Israel as well as to the nascent monotheism of ancient Judaism. It is this 'in-betweenness' of the Biblical text itself which is impressively highlighted by go-betweens such as John Spencer and so many other Biblical scholars of his and later times.