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# Bessarion on the Value of Oral Teaching and the Rule of Secrecy

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**Abstract:** Cardinal Bessarion (1408–1472), in the second chapter of the first book of his influential work *In calumniatorem Platonis*, attempted to reply to Georgios Trapezuntios' (1396–1474) criticism against Plato in the *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*. Bessarion investigates why the Athenian philosopher maintained, in several dialogues, that the sacred truths should not be communicated to the general public and argued in favor of the value of oral transmission of knowledge, largely based on his theory about the cognitive processes. Recently, Fr. Bessarion Kouotsis has argued that Cardinal Bessarion's reasoning draws primarily on the "Disciplina Arcani", i.e., the rule of secrecy, which was an established practice of the Early Christian Church, aimed at protecting and preserving the core elements of the religion from outsiders. While I find Kouotsis' approach interesting and thought-provoking—for instance, the idea that Bessarion's argumentation was likely influenced by Eastern Christian views on the rule of secrecy—I intend, first of all, to discuss why Bessarion did not explicitly mention it. Moreover, I would like to argue that Bessarion's good knowledge of the long Platonic tradition and Eastern mysticism, encompassing both pagan and Christian elements, should also be considered a significant source. Furthermore, I would like to question Kouotsis' implicit argument that Bessarion's views were dominated by his training in Orthodox theology and discuss the possibility that Pletho's (1355–1454) teaching was the obvious influence for Bessarion's defense of secrecy. After all, we should bear in mind that Anastos has already pointed out Pletho's reverence for the rule of secrecy. Finally, I would like to support that Bessarion, in the specific text, focused predominantly on the epistemological and cognitive aspects of oral teaching, resorting to the rule of secrecy only to enhance his views.

**Keywords:** Bessarion; Plato; Pletho; Neoplatonism; mysticism; soul; memory



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## 1. Introduction

Cardinal Bessarion (1408–1472) [1], [2] (pp. 370–378), [3], renowned scholar and patron of humanities in 15th century Italy, was a perspicacious reader of both ancient Greek philosophy and Patristic texts. His strategy was to harmonize the two traditions. Moreover, he made serious efforts to reconcile the warring sides of the dispute between pro-Platonic and pro-Aristotelian Byzantine scholars in the 15th century.

In the second chapter of the first book of his influential work *In calumniatorem Platonis* [4], attempting to reply to Georgios Trapezuntios' (1396–1474) criticism against Plato in the *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis* [5], Bessarion investigates why the Athenian philosopher maintained, in several dialogues, that the sacred truths should not be communicated to the general public and argued in favor of the value of oral transmission of knowledge, largely based on his theory about the cognitive processes.

Bessarion, aiming to vindicate Plato against Trapezuntios' attack, explores the reasons behind Plato's alleged abstinence from writing about the highest principles of knowledge. He argues that Plato believed these truths were unsuitable for public dissemination. Bessarion maintains that the philosopher, according to the Platonic tradition, has an obligation to instruct his students on these highest truths exclusively through oral transmission. Plato, according to Bessarion, firmly held that teachings about divine things are more effectively

safeguarded within the soul rather than in written form. To support this claim, Bessarion, in the *In Calumniatorem Platonis* (1.2.1–3), cites Plato's *Phaedrus* and the dubious Platonic *Second* and *Seventh Epistles*, as well as *Lysis' Epistle to Hipparchus* [4].

Recently, Fr. Bessarion Kouotsis has argued that Cardinal Bessarion's reasoning draws primarily on the "Disciplina Arcani", i.e., the rule of secrecy, which was an established practice of the Early Christian Church [6], [7] (pp. 111–130) aimed at protecting and preserving the core elements of the religion from outsiders [8] (pp. 131–152). The Greek translation of this Latin locution would be "μυστηριοκρυψία", as some early modern scholars have suggested [9].

Kouotsis suggests that while Bessarion's primary purpose was to defend Plato, without explicitly referring to the rule of secrecy, he drew upon this Early Church tradition in order to highlight Plato's convergence with Christian teaching. Kouotsis maintains that by the 15th century, the rule of secrecy was no longer known in the West, but it persisted in Byzantium. Thus, Bessarion effectively revived an ancient Christian tradition, since the practice of Christian Liturgy from the 1st to the 5th centuries also exemplifies the precautions taken to preserve doctrine [6], [10] (p. 155).

While I find Kouotsis' approach interesting and thought-provoking—for instance, the idea that Bessarion's argumentation was likely influenced by Eastern Christian views on the rule of secrecy—I intend, first of all, to discuss why Bessarion did not explicitly mention it. Moreover, I would like to argue that Bessarion's good knowledge of the long Platonic tradition and Eastern mysticism (a set of beliefs, doctrines, practices, discourses, texts, and experiences aimed at the attainment of insight in ancient wisdom and ultimate hidden truths), encompassing both pagan and Christian elements, should also be considered as a significant source. Furthermore, I would like to question Kouotsis' implicit argument that Bessarion's views were dominated by his training in Orthodox theology and discuss the possibility that Pletho's (1355–1454) teaching was the obvious influence for Bessarion's defense of secrecy. After all, we should bear in mind that Anastos has already pointed out Pletho's reverence for the rule of secrecy [11] (pp. 275–277). Finally, I would like to support that Bessarion, in the specific text, focused predominantly on the epistemological and cognitive aspects of oral teaching, resorting to the rule of secrecy only to enhance his views.

## 2. Bessarion on Secrecy and His Ancient Sources

Cardinal Bessarion navigated the complex intellectual landscape of 15th century Renaissance Italy by distancing himself from both radical Platonists and Aristotelians [12] (pp. 212–214). His magnum opus, *In Calumniatorem Platonis*, was a response to Georgios Trapezuntios' vitriolic attacks against Plato and Platonism. Fueled by personal animus, Trapezuntios employed skewed arguments and dubious sources in his assault [13] (pp. 1–15). Namely, Trapezuntios, in the *Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis* (I.5.51), held that Plato's contribution to the philosophical discussion about the faculties and the activities of the soul is minimal. Moreover, he blamed Plato for not saying anything about inanimate beings, as well as nothing coherent about animate beings. Plato's views are expressed in all kinds of problematic manner: falsely, obscurely, enigmatically, as well as allegorically [5]. Furthermore, Trapezuntios (I.6.5) accuses Plato of not corroborating his positions via demonstration, even in mathematics [5].

In the second chapter of the first book of *In Calumniatorem Platonis* (I.5.51, I.6.5), Bessarion tackles Trapezuntios' critique of Plato's enigmatic writing style and the latter's reluctance to directly address the sacred principles of knowledge [5]. Bessarion argues that Plato deliberately avoided explicit explanations of the highest divine matters, opting instead for enigmatic references. This choice stemmed from his conviction, shared with the Pythagoreans, that profound truths should not be disseminated to the uneducated and unprepared. I would like to point out that Bessarion focuses on secrecy and not on ineffability, although the latter is an important aspect of Christianity, especially after the circulation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* in the 6th century. As is well known, the vocabulary of

ineffability has been developed from the earlier vocabulary of secrecy. Bessarion, inspired by his ancient Greek sources, does not discuss ineffability; his arguments are concentrated on the proper ways of transmission and dissemination of profound theological (in the broad sense) truths. Bessarion's narrative is primarily based on the practices of the Pythagoreans and Platonic excerpts that imply secrecy (1.2.2.1–11, 1.2.2.24–25, 1.2.3.8–10, 1.2.4.20–24, 1.2.6.11–12, 1.2.6.17–20). Even when he explicitly mentions a Christian source, the Gospel of Matthew, the passage he quotes refers to secrecy rather than ineffability [4]. Bessarion refers to silence (ἐπὶ τῶν θείων ὀφειλομένην σιγὴν καὶ τὸ σέβας) (1.2.7.19) en passant, discussing Aristotle's choice to express his views in written word [4]. Once again, the emphasis is on reverence, not ineffability.

Anywise, Bessarion presents Plato as following the Pythagorean precepts about the dissemination of knowledge, and he highlights the views of Pythagoras and some of his illustrious followers. The Cardinal does not explicitly condemn writing; nevertheless, he stresses that his readers safeguard themselves against the threats of vulgarization of knowledge and intellectual decline. He also states that human intellectual development is connected with the use of memory. Here (1.2.2.17–20), Bessarion's chief source is Plato's *Phaedrus* [4]. In *Phaedrus* (274b–278d), Socrates narrates the myth of Theuth [14], the Egyptian god credited with inventing writing, among other arts like arithmetic, calculation, geometry, and astronomy. Theuth presents his inventions to King Thamus, who resides in Thebes, considered by the ancient Greeks as a center of Egyptian mysticism. Theuth boasts that letters will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory. However, Thamus disagrees, replying as follows (*Phaedrus* 274e–275b):

> "This invention, O king", said Theuth, "will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered." But Thamus replied, "Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise." [15]

Socrates asks Phaedrus (*Phaedrus* 276a) if there is "another kind of speech, or word, which shows itself to be the legitimate brother of this bastard one, both in the manner of its begetting and in its better and more powerful nature" [15]. Phaedrus does not understand, hence, Socrates explains that he refers to "the word which is written with intelligence in the mind of the learner, which is able to defend itself and knows to whom it should speak, and before [with] whom to be silent". This is the living word of knowledge, which can be possessed by a soul [15], according to Socrates (*Phaedrus* 276a). It is obvious that Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, focuses on the epistemological and cognitive aspects of oral teaching and not on the mystical dimension of the myth.

Socrates expresses admiration for the ancient Egyptians, portraying them as possessing knowledge and living in a pious society. He frames the dialogue between Theuth and Thamus as occurring before the introduction of the arts to humans, lending them both an air of divine authority. However, while Socrates seems to initially adopt Thamus' conservative stance on restricting knowledge dissemination, the historical reality demonstrates otherwise; humans clearly embraced and utilized written language [16] (pp. 203–204). The myth of Theuth and Thamus, combined with the Platonic *Seventh Epistle* [17] (pp. 388–392), has

triggered the discussion about the esoteric teaching in the Academy and Plato's inclination to secrecy [18] (p. 140).

Particularly, in the *Seventh Epistle*, the author expresses Plato's hesitation for writing [16] (p. 219, n.22). He states that writing is unsuitable for conveying philosophical views; namely, the multitude could not understand philosophy through texts because it is impossible to express significant truths in written form. Written texts are useful only to a small minority of educated (*Seventh Epistle* 341d–e):

> Notwithstanding, of this much I am certain, that the best statement of these doctrines in writing or in speech would be my own statement; and further, that if they should be badly stated in writing, it is I who would be the person most deeply pained. And if I had thought that these subjects ought to be fully stated in writing or in speech to the public, what nobler action could I have performed in my life than that of writing what is of great benefit to mankind and bringing forth to the light for all men the nature of reality? But were I to undertake this task it would not, as I think, prove a good thing for men, save for some few who are able to discover the truth themselves with but little instruction; for as to the rest, some it would most unseasonably fill with a mistaken contempt, and others with an overweening and empty aspiration, as though they had learnt some sublime mysteries. [19]

Moreover, according to the *Seventh Epistle* (343a), written works are unchangeable and, as a result, they are not adaptable to the needs and capabilities of various types of audiences. In other words, they are monolithic and inflexible [19], [20] (pp. 31–44).

An interesting question would be why Bessarion focuses primarily on the *Phaedrus*, while Plato promotes secrecy in several dialogues. Namely, in the *Phaedo* (69c–d, 81a), the philosophers are compared to the purified and initiated [21]. In the *Symposium* (209e–210a), the philosophers' vision of the Forms is compared to the revelation during the Eleusinian mysteries [14]. Even in the *Phaedrus* (249c–251a), there are other passages where the esoteric overtone, concerning the soul's recollection of the Forms, is more conspicuous than in the myth of Theuth [21]. I propose that Bessarion's primal aim in the first book of *In Calumniatorem Platonis* is not solely to focus on secrecy, but, in addition, to discuss the epistemological aspects of learning. This is why he chooses to rely on Theuth's myth. Bessarion avoids presenting Plato as a bold advocate of secrecy, in contrast to the Pythagoreans. Bessarion's text gives us the impression that the Cardinal, in accordance with Renaissance humanists, considers Platonic texts as part of a legitimate tradition of ancient wisdom.

It is noteworthy that, inspired by Plato [22] (pp. 151–180), several Late Antique Platonists describe philosophical vision in terms of initiation to mysteries. Plutarch and Numenius are indicative cases [23] (pp. 52–53). Additionally, secrecy was something very important for Porphyry, who denounced the transfer of sacred knowledge to the uninitiated and unworthy ones [23] (pp. 54–55). Proclus, too, was an admirer of the Eleusinian mysteries and separated (*In Platonis rem Publicam Commentarii*, 1.6.24–28) the philosophically initiated from the unworthy [24], [25] (p. 113). Proclus was equally interested in ineffability.

Bessarion, in order to enhance Plato's views about the epistemological importance of oral transmission of knowledge, resorts to Pythagorean precepts and practices, where the rule of secrecy is the core issue. The Cardinal emphasizes the importance of safeguarding essential knowledge from the unworthy ones, enhancing and broadening the spectrum of his argumentation. The Pythagoreans, according to the Cardinal, advocated a structured initiation process, gradually guiding disciples toward deeper truths. Their core principles included silence and a strict prohibition on communicating outside the school. Students were required to listen attentively for five years without questioning or objecting. According to Bessarion (1.2.2.1–8), after this period, their eligibility to receive the most sacred knowledge was assessed [4].

In his effort to persuade readers that the Pythagorean tradition influenced Christianity, Bessarion argues that the well-known passage, in the *Gospel of Matthew*, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, and not cast your pearls before swine"[1] echoes Pythagorean

doctrines. Bessarion did not follow the well-known argument of Early Christian Fathers, like Clement of Alexandria (150–215), that the ancient Greek philosophers copied Moses's views on the value of oral transmission of the most significant truths. Moreover, it is interesting that he chooses this specific version of the proverb, following Saint Athanasius the Great (*Apologia Contra Arianos Sive Apologia Secunda*, 11.2.5–6), who had changed slightly the original passage of Matthew's Gospel [26][2]. Bessarion suggests that the safest vault for divine truths is the student's soul because it remains protected from misuse by outsiders. Additionally, he maintains that oral teaching cultivates deeper wisdom compared to learning through written words. Further, drawing on Plato's *Phaedrus*, Bessarion asserts (1.2.2.16–21) that true wisdom emerges from memory, fueled by the soul's innate power. Conversely, learning through letters, he claims, leads only to superficial knowledge and shadow wisdom [4]. It is obvious that Bessarion's primary concern is oral transmission of knowledge. He shares Plato's approach and point of view, whereas his references to Pythagorean secrecy are used as supportive material, as "argumentum ex auctoritate".

Furthermore, Bessarion bolsters his argumentation by quoting the *Epistle to Hipparchus* by Lysis (1.2.3.1–50), the Pythagorean [4]. During the Hellenistic period, an epistle, allegedly addressed by a Pythagorean named Lysis to another Pythagorean, Hipparchus, of the 4th century BCE, gained popularity [27] (pp. 111–114). In the epistle, Lysis criticizes Hipparchus for publicly teaching Pythagorean doctrines, violating their secrecy regulations [28] (p. 17). Bessarion notes (1.2.2.23–34) that although Pythagoras himself wrote some texts entrusted to his daughter Damo, she chose to keep them hidden despite potential profit because she believed that the knowledge contained within them should remain concealed from the morally unprepared ones [4]. The core meaning of the epistle is that the goods of true philosophy should not be shared with those who have not even considered purifying their souls.

What is more, Bessarion notes that Plato shared Pythagoras' reverence for oral teaching, once again using secrecy as a tool for a broader strategy to support and promote recollection and memory as cognitive factors. According to the Cardinal, the Pythagoreans, until Plato's time, followed their master's tradition and transmitted knowledge exclusively orally. Bessarion emphasizes that Plato himself did not teach through books but relied on dialogue, because oral transmission of knowledge is, cognitively speaking, more profitable for the student. He even claims that Plato left no written record of his own teachings, while his dialogues served solely as conduits of Socrates' ideas, not his own. Additionally, reproducing arguments from the long Pythagorean and Platonic tradition, Bessarion argues (1.2.4.1–7) that Plato deliberately wrote about divine matters in a concise, cryptic, and obscure manner, making them inaccessible to the uneducated and uninitiated [4].

To support his claim that both Pythagoras and Plato warned against writing down deep theological and philosophical truths, Bessarion cites the *Second* and *Seventh Epistles*. He highlights a passage (1.2.4.8–12) where the author suggests using riddling and puzzling writing in order to intentionally obscure the meaning for the less discerning readers [4]. Additionally, Bessarion draws on "Dionysius" (1.2.4.21–29), who emphasizes the need for protecting unutterable truths from the uneducated and warns of the inevitable corruption introduced by the written word [4]. Bessarion insists on focusing on the epistemological and cognitive aspects of learning when using the written and the oral word.

He further bolsters his argument (1.2.6.1–16) by citing Julius Caesar's (100–44 BC) *De Bello Gallico* 6.14 [29], where Caesar notes the Druids' prohibition of writing their priestly knowledge [30] (pp. 89–91), [31] (pp. 160–161). This aligns with Bessarion's claim that Plato wrote almost nothing about the highest principles. He argues (1.2.6.16–21) that such truths deserve reverence and worship within the soul, not uncontrolled public exposure [4]. Bessarion reiterates his point: both Pythagoras and Plato believed that the most divine truths should remain unwritten and undisclosed to the masses. He emphasizes that Plato never penned his personal views, resorting to enigmatic writing only when forced to express himself partially. However, one might remark that Bessarion avoids commenting on the fact that Plato wrote the *Epistles*. Ultimately, Bessarion concludes (1.2.6.22–32) that

Plato deemed oral teaching and memory as the safest methods for safeguarding divine truths, avoiding the danger of potential corruption inherent in written language [4].

While defending Plato's preference for oral teaching, predominantly for epistemological and cognitive reasons, Bessarion also felt compelled to address the concerns about Aristotle's reliance on written works, without implying Aristotle's inferiority to Plato. He acknowledges that oral transmission remains pivotal in knowledge transfer but argues that written texts retain value, as well. They serve as memory aids, preserving knowledge for future generations so that they can access the wisdom of the past. Bessarion emphasizes our debt to Aristotle and other ancient philosophers who significantly enriched various fields through their writing. However, he cautions against criticizing those who chose not to write. Their decision, he asserts, did not stem from ignorance, and their contribution to the lineage of knowledge should not be dismissed. He even suggests that their secrecy might demonstrate a profound respect for the divine truths. Ultimately, Bessarion advocates acknowledging both approaches with equal respect, recognizing the distinct, yet valuable contributions of those who communicated orally and those who used written texts. This ensures that Plato's preference for oral teaching does not imply any diminished stature compared to Aristotle [4]. His conciliatory stance, in the *In Calumniatorem Platonis* (1.2.7), concerning the heated debate between Platonists and Aristotelians is obvious.

## 3. Bessarion on the Rule of Secrecy

To substantiate his arguments, Bessarion relied heavily on core aspects of the Pythagorean and Platonic traditions. First of all, the emphasis on the myth of Theuth and Thamus indicates that Bessarion could have also drawn from Hermeticism, a tradition widely popular both in late Byzantium and Renaissance Italy. It is well known that, during the Hellenistic period, the Egyptian god Theuth was conflated with the Greek god Hermes, giving rise to the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a foundational text of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance esotericism. Imhotep, the Egyptian polymath, and Amenhotep, the scribe, were also incorporated into the figure of Hermes Trismegistus during the Hellenistic period.

A core tenet of the Hermetic tradition was the safeguard of knowledge from the uninitiated [32] (pp. 7–36). This "prisca theologia", the ancient divine wisdom, supposedly transmitted to humanity already in its early days, was believed to be endangered by written language. The concern was that texts could easily reach and potentially be misused by the ignorant and morally unworthy, who would lack proper understanding. Additionally, written texts were seen as inherently limited, lacking the voice and interactive nature of oral dialogue. The texts could not respond to queries or clarify ambiguities, and, crucially, could circulate freely even among those unfit to receive the knowledge these texts contained [33] (pp. 395–397), [34] (pp. 12–76). These views echo Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Moreover, the rule of secrecy was a basic feature of Hermeticism. Namely, in a text from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Asclepius forbids any translation of the wisdom communicated by God to Ammon, in order to prevent the spread of knowledge to the Greeks and the arrogant ones. Asclepius was afraid that the Greek language would destroy the power of revealed knowledge. Furthermore, in the *Bible* (Books of Enoch and Daniel), we can find strict prohibitions on the disclosure of sacred knowledge to the masses [35] (pp. 14–15). However, we have to bear in mind that, while God's revelation in the *Bible* is offered to the people of Israel, the Hermetic revelation is protected by secrecy. In fact, the core truths of Hermeticism were codified in symbols in order to maintain secrecy. Moreover, the Gnostics claimed that they had received revelation whose disclosure was denied to the unworthy.

Plato's *Phaedrus* is considered to be a key source of this popular tradition [36]. Followers of Hermeticism and other Eastern esoteric traditions focused on Socrates' views in that dialogue. They agreed, in a certain sense, with Socrates' views that written texts are inherently unclear and uncertain, incapable of conveying true understanding and offering only a semblance of wisdom rather than its essence. They also appreciated Socrates' emphasis

on the limitations of the written word as voiceless, and, most importantly, accessible even to those lacking proper context and understanding.

As I mentioned earlier, Fr. Bessarion Kouotsis, in his recent book, argues that Cardinal Bessarion's views about selective knowledge transmission resonated with a centuries-old practice in the Early Christian Church, known as the rule of secrecy (Disciplina Arcani). This practice, documented by Early Church Fathers and passed down to later generations, encouraged caution in revealing core Christian truths and mysteries to outsiders, including non-Christians and the uninitiated. I am obliged to stress that, to avoid exaggeration, while absolute silence was not an official rule, it did represent a prudent approach.

In Christian sources, the point of departure for the rule of secrecy is a passage from the *Gospel of Mark* (4.10–13), which was written in the 1st century AD for a gentile audience:

> And when he was alone, those present along with the Twelve questioned him about the parables. He answered them:
>
> "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, so that 'they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven.' Jesus said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables?"

According to the text, Christ himself preferred to teach through parables, leading Christians to develop various forms of secrecy. In the *Gospel of Matthew* 7.6, we find Christ saying "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, and not cast your pearls before swine", which summarizes the rule of secrecy. Early Christians were worried, in a certain sense, about the possible misinterpretation and misuse of their doctrines by unbelievers or people who were not experienced enough in the Christian religion that some complicated aspects of religion would disorient them.

The *Book of Revelation* is also written in a cryptic language. Additionally, the author has used esoteric formulae to make its content accessible only to a group of educated, initiated, and enlightened ones (*Book of Revelation*, 13:9, 17:9). Moreover, the same principles are preserved in apocryphal texts of Early Christianity. In the *Apocalypse of Paul* (51; NTA 2, 743), there are also warnings against the dissemination of the text to the unworthy [37]. Finally, in the *Questions of Bartholomew* (4.66–68), Jesus seems to hold that only the faithful and trustworthy would get access to knowledge about the mysteries of post-mortem punishments [38].

Basil of Caesarea (330–379) maintains that the rule of secrecy originated with the Apostles themselves, urging caution in discussing the Eucharist and Transfiguration publicly [39] (pp. 241–255). Namely, Basil holds (*De Spiritu Sancto*, 27, 66) that, while "κηρύγματα" (orations) would be proclaimed to the wider audience, "δόγματα" (doctrines) should be accessible to a selected few [40]. Moreover, he indicates (*De Spiritu Sancto*, 67) that there are many unwritten mysteries:

> Time will fail me if I attempt to recount the unwritten mysteries of the Church. Of the rest I say nothing. . . While the unwritten traditions are so many, and their bearing on the mystery of godliness is so important, can they refuse to allow us a single word which has come down to us from the Fathers;—which we found, derived from untutored custom, abiding in unperverted churches;—a word for which the arguments are strong, and which contributes in no small degree to the completeness of the force of the mystery? [40]

Additionally, he exhorts (*De Spiritu Sancto*, 44) that "the ineffable be honored by silence" [40].

Despite Basil's received written texts, the theoretical core of the "Disciplina Arcani" was presented by and credited to Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386). Cyril, in his *Catechesis Sexta* (*Patrologia Graeca* 33, 589B), advises the candidates for baptism not to write down the text of the creed. Instead, they should engrave it in their memory. Although later scholars held that the most articulated version of "Disciplina Arcani" would be found in Cyril's

texts [41] (pp. 84–88), similar views were also expressed by, among others, Clement of Alexandria [42] (pp. 96–99), Ambrose of Milan (339–397) [43] (p. 166), [44] (pp. 168–169), Eulogius (d.608), Photius (810–891), in his *Variae Lectiones* (*Patrologia Graeca*, 103, 1028B), and Theodore Balsamon (12th century), in his *Sancti Basilii, Ex XXVII Capite, Eorumque de Sancto Spiritu ad beatum Amphilochium Scripta sunt* (*Patrologia Graeca* 138, 840C–841A). Kouotsis, in his book, presents a detailed list of authors that, in his view, were in favor of "Disciplina Arcani" [6] (pp. 111–116).

Additionally, as has already been mentioned, Kouotsis argues that the rule of secrecy survived in Byzantium during the Middle Ages, while it was forgotten in the West. I would like to point out, though, that the only reminiscence of the rule of secrecy in Orthodox liturgy is that the faithful hear, before the recitation of the Creed, the phrase "The doors, the doors!". The priest, depending on the architecture of the altar or the tradition of each diocese, closes the doors of the sanctuary to prevent the profanation of the mysteries. In any case, in my view, this is not an explicit survival of the rule of secrecy among the Orthodox [45] (p. 156). However, Le Goff remarks that the Orthodox liturgy is based on concealment, since the sanctuary is not directly visible, while in the Western churches, everything is immediately visible [46] (pp. 70–71). Le Goff refrains from mentioning that most of the time, during Mass, according to the Orthodox rite, the doors are open and the faithful are able to see inside the Sanctuary. It is worth noting that—contrary to the claim that secrecy survived only in Eastern Christianity but not in Western Europe—Berthold of Moosburg, a German Dominican in the 14th century, supported that Platonism did adopt patterns of secrecy. Deeper truths should be revealed only to the worthy [47] (pp. 106–107). Berthold was inspired by the introduction of Boethius' (480–525) *De hebdomadibus*, in which the latter praised secrecy and promoted the distinction between "vulgus" and "docti" [48] (pp. 299–304). It is well-known and attested that Boethius was influenced by Neoplatonic thinkers. Aquinas later commented on Boethius' treatise [49].

According to Kouotsis, spiritual life within Christianity has two distinct dimensions: the communicable and the ineffable. While some aspects, like the doctrine, can be formulated and transmitted through writing, others, like personal experiences of faith, can only be shared orally with those on a similar path. However, there exists a third category of ineffable truths that relates to experiences so profound that they transcend words and can only be directly experienced by the individual believer [6] (p. 114). Although I agree with Kouotsis' classification, I think that it is obvious that Bessarion, in his text, does not discuss personal experiences of faith or theurgy.

I would like to point out that the introduction of secrecy into the Christian Church has not been a monolithic event, but rather a gradual process, influenced by several factors, and its extent, chronological and geographical, varied [50] (pp. 289–310). Undoubtedly, pagan, religious, and philosophical mysticism have vastly contributed to this introduction, as did the Jewish tradition with its strong esoteric elements since Moses. It is well known that Plotinus (204–270) in the *Enneads* (6, 9, 11) [51], Porphyry (234–305) in the *Ad Marcellam* (15, 284.7–22) [52], Iamblichus (245–325) in the *De mysteriis* (6.7) [53] and in the *De vita Pythagorica* (75, 43.9–12) [28], and Proclus (412–485) in the *In Timaeum* (3, 248.6) [54] were also proponents of the rule of secrecy, although they disagreed about the preponderance of a contemplative or theurgic approach. The aforementioned Neoplatonists agree that the highest divine truths should be kept away from the uninitiated and the unworthy, although their views are not uniform. Plotinus and Porphyry focus predominantly on the epistemological and cognitive aspects of oral teaching, while Iamblichus' approach has an explicit mystical overtone.

Bradly Billings gives us a very insightful overview of the possible sources of the rule of secrecy in the Early Church. He proposes that one can trace the roots of the rule of secrecy in the Jewish tradition, namely Josephus (37–100) and Philo (20BC–50AD). Moreover, Billings points to the strong Hellenistic background, since most of the flourishing philosophical schools of the era attempted to preserve their most important teachings by keeping them hidden from the wider audience. It is worth noticing that there are passages in Plato's

*Gorgias* (497C) and *Theaetetus* (156A) that allude to the esoteric character of ancient Greek philosophy. Furthermore, Billings observes that most of the religions of the Hellenistic period and Late Antiquity were based on mystery and esotericism [55] (pp. 91–135).

Still, I am obliged to suggest that "Disciplina Arcani" was not unanimously accepted by Christian thinkers. Tertullian (155–220), for example, worried about its consequences [56] (p. 126). Apart from Tertullian, Justin Martyr (100–165) harbored no secrets [57] (p. 10). Augustine also denounced esotericism and concealment [58] (173–199). Despite Celsus' references (in the 2nd century), secrecy was not an essential practice of early Christianity, as it surely was for Gnosticism [59] (p. 70). Modern scholars do not unanimously accept the thesis that in Early Christianity, especially before the 4th century, strict rules of secrecy were kept [60] (p. 27), [61] (p. 84). The great theologian John Henry Newman argues that in the primitive Church, the rule of secrecy was mostly a feeling and not a strict obligatory practice. According to Newman, it acquired the status of official practice in the 4th century [62] (p. 89). Newman, like the majority of scholars, was influenced by the work of Cyril of Jerusalem, whose impact on scholarship, in my view, has been overestimated. However, it is rather peculiar that some scholars support that the rule of secrecy became widespread after the legalization of Christianity by the 4th century Emperors, exactly when the Christians had no obvious reason to hide their beliefs and doctrines.

As a result, I hold that the rule of secrecy had no universal binding among early Christians; its implication was not as strict as it was among the practitioners of pagan mysteries, and it is highly probable that its roots could be traced to pagan cults [63] (p. 142). John Cowley Fisher emphasizes its origin in the theurgic mysticism of pagan communities [64] (pp. 159–161). The rule of secrecy was not a common practice among the first Christians but spread in Eastern Christianity mainly under the influence of the pre-existing esoteric substratum [65] (pp. 261–264). Numerous Eastern texts and religions were based on esotericism and mysticism and, as a result, people in the Middle East and North Africa were keen to introduce secrecy, to a certain extent, to Christian liturgical practices. Furthermore, the avoidance of mentioning certain Christian mysteries in some texts could be interpreted in another way and not always as a result of the rule of secrecy [66] (p. 488). Paul Post makes an interesting distinction between a broad and a strict sense of the rule of secrecy. According to him, the latter addressed the catechumens, while the broader was a pale imagery of already known and diffused pagan practices [67] (p. 387). T. Herbert Bindley also holds that, according to numerous 4th century sources, the rule of secrecy was not a common practice among Christians, and that even the most sacred aspects of the Christian dogma were publicly discussed [68] (pp. 602–603). Moreover, the Christians' Holy Books were accessible to everyone [69] (pp. 12–13). A. D. Nock holds that the rule of secrecy was in fact, for the triumphant Church, a matter of diplomatic and pedagogic technique and not a liturgical or doctrinal need [70] (pp. 210–211). I totally agree with Nock and I claim that his approach could also shed more light on Bessarion's views.

As is widely known, Bessarion was Pletho's student in Mystra for several years [71] (pp. 1–36). Undoubtedly, Pletho, as a systematic reader of Plato, Platonism, and the ancient mystical traditions, was well informed about the rule of secrecy, as it was applied in both pagan and Christian communities. In his works, he refers to the Eleusinian Mysteries. Moreover, we can trace Bessarion's core arguments regarding Plato's abstinence from exposing his views on knowledge in written form back to par. 5 of Pletho's *Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele Obiectiones* [72]. Pletho did not rely on Christian sources to elaborate his argument. It is highly probable that Bessarion reproduces Pletho's view on the subject. Moreover, Pletho focuses on the epistemological and cognitive aspects of oral learning and on the value of memory, as Plato does in the myth of Theuth and Thamus in the *Phaedrus*, and not on secrecy, as Bessarion does, at least partially. Nevertheless, contrary to Bessarion, Pletho in par. 5 of the *Contra Scholarii pro Aristotele Obiectiones* openly accuses Aristotle of intentionally distorting Plato's oral lectures [72]. As already mentioned, Bessarion followed the middle way in the dispute between Aristotelians and Platonists in Late Byzantium concerning the preponderance of Plato or Aristotle. Anastos proposes that Pletho was

affected by the tradition of the rule of secrecy, but he is ambivalent about whether Pletho's sources are Christian or pagan [11] (pp. 275–277). Since Bessarion was trained in Mystra under the guidance of Pletho, and since we know that in the School of Mystra, secrecy, in the line of the Pythagorean and Platonic tradition, seems to have been demanded from the disciples [73] (pp. 57–58), [74] (p. 73), it is highly probable that Bessarion was deeply affected by his sojourn next to Pletho so as to articulate his views on the rule of secrecy in addition to his religious readings and liturgical experience.

As I mentioned above, Kouotsis argues that in Bessarion's defense of Plato in *In Calumniatorem Platonis*, Bessarion drew upon the "Disciplina Arcani" in order to emphasize the parallels between Plato's philosophy and Christian teachings. While this practice had faded away from Western consciousness by Bessarion's time, Kouotsis claims that it remained actual in Eastern ecclesiastical circles. However, Kouotsis does not provide enough textual or historical references to support this claim, leaving its validity open to question. Contrariwise, there are indications that Bessarion favored the out-loud pronunciation of the words during Mass, especially during the Anaphora of Holy Communion [75] (pp. 310–311), a position that does not support secrecy the way Kouotsis understands it. Moreover, in the 15th century, Western scholars such as Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) were also advocates of secrecy, and as a result, secrecy was known outside of Byzantium [76] (p. 209).

After Bessarion's death, the rule of secrecy gained popularity among the humanists. Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), in his *Oratio De hominis dignitate* (1486)[3], echoing Bessarion's text, interprets the passage from Matthew, "Give not the holy things to the dogs, and not cast your pearls before swine," emphasizing the need to protect esoteric wisdom from the uninitiated. Pico, however, sought to reconcile this Platonic–Pythagorean concept with Christian truth through his exploration of Kabbalah. Bessarion's *In Calumniatorem Platonis* also played a pivotal role in shaping the image of Plato as a theologian. This portrayal was further solidified by Marsilio Ficino's (1433–1499) "pia philosophia", which presented Plato as a sacred figure embodying the unity of philosophical and religious traditions. Ficino's interpretation of Plato drew inspiration from Bessarion's treatise since Ficino had studied it carefully. In addition, Bessarion's arguments about the rule of secrecy probably inspired Peter Ramus (1515–1572), who reproduced Bessarion's views [77] (p. 239).

## 4. Conclusions

To sum up, Bessarion dedicated a few pages to reply to Trapezuntios' criticism of Plato's enigmatic style. Bessarion predominantly relied on Plato, Pletho, and *Lysis' Epistle to Hipparchus*". In this specific section of his book, there is no explicit mention of Christian sources, apart from the quote from the *Gospel of Mark*. Furthermore, Bessarion focused on the epistemological and cognitive aspects of learning through oral and written word, mainly following Plato's and Pletho's views. While Bessarion shared the rationale of the rule of secrecy, in a certain sense and up to a certain extent, I argued that his views should not be exclusively considered as the outcome of his Orthodox education. Bessarion would have known about the "Disciplina Arcani". However, there are no explicit references to oblige us to conclude, as Kouotsis holds, that Bessarion was a proponent of "Disciplina Arcani". Instead, he chose to reply to Trapezuntios primarily by resorting to non-religious sources. His sojourn in Mystra and his education under Pletho's guidance shaped his views on the subject. Moreover, early Christians had adopted the core patterns of the rule of secrecy from pagan, philosophical, and religious sources. Bessarion was adequately trained to discern the historical and textual roots of "Disciplina Arcani". I agree, nevertheless, with Kouotsis that Bessarion's work influenced Renaissance humanists and was crucial for the re-emergence of the rule of secrecy in 15th and 16th century philosophy.

Bessarion, although a devoted Christian, was probably taught by Pletho that ancient Greek philosophy was predominantly a spiritual exercise. As Pierre Hadot states, philosophy "raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-awareness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom" [78] (p. 83). Bessar-

ion's religious commitments and strategies would have been informed by this conception, as his views on the uses of secrecy in philosophy and religious practices served the same purpose: the gradual ascent of the educated and worthy to an authentic internal and external life.

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## Notes

[1] The Greek text of Matthew, 7.6–8: "Μὴ δῶτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσὶ μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων".

[2] Athanasius' Greek text: "μὴ δῶτε τὰ ἅγια τοῖς κυσὶ μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων".

[3] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola supports, in § 40 of his *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, without referring Bessarion explicitly: "At mysteria secretiora et sub cortice legis rudique verborum pretestu latitantia, altissimae divinitatis archana, plebi palam facere, quid erat aliud quam dare sanctum canibus et inter porcos spargere margaritas?"

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