

CHAPTER 14

Esotericism

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Like other terms in the study of religion, “esotericism” is problematic. It has different meanings connected to different approaches. The noun “esotericism” emerged in the late eighteenth century. But the institutionalized study of esotericism as an academic discipline came only in 1965, with the establishment of a chair in the History of Christian Esotericism at Sorbonne University. Since then, the field has developed rapidly. I will first deal with the historical roots of the word “esotericism” and the closely related “occultism.” The range of topics and methods that characterize the field will then be considered.

A Look at the Historical Semantics

The terms “esoteric” and “esotericism” come from the Greek *eisō* and *ēsō*, which, as adverbs of location, mean “inside, within.” The adjective *esōterikós*, known since the second century CE, denotes “that which is within.” It is used for the insights given by teachers to elitist “inner circles” through oral transmission. Since the Neo-Platonic philosopher Iamblichos, the Pythagorean school functioned as the prototype for these circles. These original meanings are reflected in several European languages in which derivations of *esōterikós* are used for everything that is known by only a small group of insiders with purportedly superior knowledge (see Hanegraaff 2006, 336). The noun *esōterika* denotes books or topics that are related to these secret teachings (see Neugebauer-Wölk 2014, 67).

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The expression *esotericks* was introduced into English in the seventeenth century by Thomas Stanley, who used it in his work on the history of philosophy for the members of the inner circle of the Pythagoreans whom Iamblichos already called *esōterikoi*. As far as we know, the abstractum *Esoterik* (esotericism) first appeared in late eighteenth-century Germany in connection with Freemasonry and other disputed initiatory societies that emerged and gained importance from the eighteenth century onwards (see Neugebauer-Wölk 2010). It became more widespread in the nineteenth century, especially in French (*l'ésotérisme*) and English. “Western esotericism” (*L' esotérisme occidental*), a widely adopted term used by Antoine Faivre to demarcate the field of historiography of esotericism, was invented as a term in the 1880s by French occultists who wanted to distinguish their form of Christian theosophy from the “false Eastern esotericism” of the Theosophical Society (see Strube 2017).

Several scholars prefer the terms “occult/occultism” to “esoteric/esotericism” (see Pasi 2006; Partridge 2015). They use the Latin term *occultus* (hidden, concealed, secret), as used in the Middle Ages for all kinds of invisible forces and qualities (*qualitates occultae*). Medieval European natural magic (*magia naturalis*) constructed its theories and practices on the basis of these hidden forces and qualities of things, in contrast to the conceptualization of magic as relying on the contact with demons (*goetia*). In the sixteenth century this notion was expanded and transformed into concepts of occult philosophy as well as systematized occult sciences (see Hanegraaff 2013, 75–83) that were considered to be based on age-old insights that had to be unearthed again. A prominent example for this mixture of natural magic, Platonic philosophy, Kabbalah, astrology, and alchemy is Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia* (1510).

As far as we know, the noun *occultisme* was first used in 1842 in a French dictionary entry to denote the dubious hidden agendas of priests and aristocrats (see Strube 2016, 13–14). In 1853 Jean-Marie Ragon utilized it as an umbrella term for the occult sciences, especially for magic and mesmerism (see Strube 2016, 447). Soon thereafter the neo-Catholic socialist Alphonse-Louis Constant, a.k.a. Eliphas Lévi, whose writings are seminal for modern magic and occultism, adopted the term from Ragon and popularized it. Occultism became synonymous with ancient wisdom about the mysteries of nature – with magic, alchemy, Kabbalah, and astrology as major occult disciplines, supplemented by divination, mesmerism, and a focus on paranormal human powers like communicating with the dead or telepathy: “As self-described ‘occultists’ during the nineteenth century tried to create a new synthesis of science and religion, claiming that the hidden secrets of nature were already known to the initiates of ancient mystery traditions, it was only logical that the terms esoteric(ism) and occult(ism) would come to be used more or less interchangeably” (Hanegraaff 2016, 162).

The historical role of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occultism is still debated. Some scholars consider it to be the modernized continuation of much older esoteric currents in the wake of the disenchantment of Western societies (see Hanegraaff 1996). Others see occultism as a post-Enlightenment movement in its own right (see Owen 2004 and Treitel 2004 on England and Germany, respectively). Strube (2016) investigates the Neo-Catholic and socialist roots of the very influential French occultism going back to the first half of the nineteenth century.

At present, “esotericism” as an etic term is understood in at least two ways (see Pasi 2016). As a comparative category, it stands for a kind of world view and connected practices that can be found within different cultures throughout history and around the world. Esotericism in this sense may not be universal, but it is at least widespread, historically as well as geographically. As a historiographical term, esotericism denotes a unique cluster of historical currents that arose either within the interaction of different cultures or as a specific Euro-American phenomenon, as the propagators of a “Western esotericism” would take it.

Egil Asprem (2014b) has pointed out that these conceptualizations can be seen as distinct but not necessarily incompatible research programs. They fit with comparative religion and the history of religion as two basic disciplines that have shaped the study of religion since its beginnings. The case of “esotericism” is nonetheless a special one, as this term is used both as a comparative category and as a name for a singular historical phenomenon. The problems that arise from this dual usage are exemplified by the term “myth.” Usually, myth is thought of as a genre of narratives that can be found in many cultural and ethnic communities that do not necessarily share a common history. This approach fits with esotericism as a comparative category. But what if the term “myth” were also be used to designate one particular narrative only, a story that emerged within European culture and played a substantial role in the identity-formation of “Western” culture before it finally became globally influential from the nineteenth century onwards? The comparativists would probably be astonished by the parochialism of their colleagues but could easily accept their research as a valid kind of regional studies, whereas their colleagues would warn of the danger of dissolving the necessary demarcations of the field, thereby giving away its historical specificity in exchange for universal generalizations. Exactly this kind of discussion takes place among scholars of esotericism.

The tensions yet also the fruitful competition or even collaboration between the approaches could be downplayed for a while because of a reorientation of research in the 1990s. Since then, the comparative approach has been more or less neglected, and the investigation of so-called “Western esotericism” has become dominant. Only recently has this narrowing been seriously questioned by new comparative approaches and also by the questioning of the “Western” within esotericism studies.

The use of esotericism/occultism as comparative categories fits with the original meanings of these terms. It centers on the notions of hiddenness, secrecy, and higher knowledge of the world, including its supposedly divine origin. The following sections will treat the “occult sciences” and secrecy as the formative factor of religious groups and currents, and the notion of higher knowledge as the subject of comparative studies.

The “Occult Sciences” Across Cultural and Geographical Borders

The theories and practices that have been labelled *scientiae occultae* in Western Europe have parallels in many cultures and regions. Accordingly, they have been relevant topics in cultural anthropology, ethnography, and the study of religion on a global level.

Contemporary scholars who undertake this kind of research are aware of the problematic role of comparative religion within colonialism. Additionally, they use methodologically improved forms of comparison (for the new comparativism, see Stausberg 2011 and Freiburger 2019).

To take an example: the term “magic” has played varying roles in European cultural history since ancient times. Based on views of magic that date back to Hellenistic antiquity, in the colonial era the term was used to denote forms of “pagan superstition” and “primitive irrational thought” over against what was considered to be the true religion and rational science of the superior colonial powers. Contemporary scholarship needs to consider this discourse from a post-colonial perspective. Additionally, improved forms of comparative studies should differentiate the different “patterns of magicity” – for example, the idea of controlling other persons by ritual means, the ascription of miraculous capabilities to particular individuals, and the belief in the efficacy of words (see Otto and Stausberg 2013, 1–16).

The changing relationships of “occult sciences” to other forms of knowledge, including modern physics and alternative methods of healing, are a promising area of research. Catarina Guenzi’s studies on recent developments in Indian astrology are a good example (see Guenzi 2013). Other research places the study of European “occult sciences” in a broader context, such as Liana Saif’s study (2015) of the impact of Arabic astrology and magic on the occult philosophy of early modern Europe.

The Social and Religious Formation of Secrecy and the Claim to Higher Knowledge

Scholars of religion often use esotericism to categorize activities based on the practice “of reserving certain kinds of salvific knowledge for a selected elite of initiated disciples” (Hanegraaff 2006, 337). Secrecy as social and religious capital (see also von Stuckrad 2010, 54–59) involves concealed membership, secret doctrines and rituals, secret signs and codes, vows of silence, hidden meeting places, probation and preparatory periods, followed by initiations through skilled teachers or priests. Insofar as esoteric forms of group building intend to survive for more than one generation, their secret cannot be kept totally hidden within the core group. An often complex intertwining of concealment and disclosure takes place.

Within the study of Asian religions this kind of esotericism is found in Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, Tibet, China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan – cases categorized as “esoteric Buddhism.” The beliefs and practices of the Bāuls of Bengal and of certain schools of Hindu tantra can also be categorized as “esoteric” in this sense, as can European initiatory societies like the Masonic lodges, the Order of the Golden and Rosy Cross, the Illuminati, the Theosophical Society, and the Hermetic order of the Golden Dawn with its different offshoots. Instructive comparisons can be made between esoteric organizations within Europe and those outside Europe (see Urban 1997).

A similar typological concept that fosters cross-cultural comparisons was proposed by Kocku von Stuckrad, who conceives of esotericism as a form of higher knowledge.

Apparently, he derives the topic of secrecy from the claim to possess a superior and usually hidden wisdom. “Not surprisingly,” von Stuckrad explains, “the idea of absolute knowledge is closely linked to a discourse of *secrecy*, not because esoteric truths are restricted to an ‘inner circle’ of specialists or initiates, but because the dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses. Esoteric knowledge is not necessarily exclusive, but hidden” (von Stuckrad 2008, 230–231). Understood as revolving around hidden knowledge, esotericism is not necessarily tied to initiatory organizations. But even self-declared esoteric writers who publish on the global book market do not escape the dynamics and at times also the tensions between concealment and revelation implicit in the claim to be transmitting higher and usually hidden insights.

Similar to Wouter Hanegraaff, whose view will be considered shortly, von Stuckrad initially followed a project of revisioning the basics of “Western self-understanding” (see von Stuckrad 2005, xi–xii) building on the historical currents that are usually referred to in the Faivre/Hanegraaff paradigm of historical esotericism research. Nevertheless, the potential of von Stuckrad’s notion of esotericism for comparative studies is evident. He also started to integrate Jewish and Muslim perspectives into what one could call a “Mediterranean esotericism” that includes Northern Africa and the Middle East. In recent publications he opts for framing historical developments in concepts like entangled histories instead of using the term “Western” to demarcate the whole field of esotericism (see von Stuckrad 2016, 174).

Esotericism as the Core of All Religion

It is needless to explain that this book is not the Secret Doctrine in its entirety, but a select number of fragments of its fundamental tenets. . . . But it is perhaps desirable to state unequivocally that the teachings, however fragmentary and incomplete, contained in these volumes, belong neither to the Hindu, the Zoroastrian, the Chaldean, nor the Egyptian religion, neither to Buddhism, Islam, Judaism nor Christianity exclusively. The Secret Doctrine is the essence of all these. Sprung from it in their origins, the various religious schemes are now made merge back into their original element, out of which every mystery and dogma has grown, developed and become materialised. (Blavatsky 1888, viii)

Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), building on the work of F. Max Müller (1823–1900) and other comparativists in religious studies, maintained that the secrets that esotericism has to offer are identical in all religions. Scholars of esotericism have adopted this perspective. Pioneers in the academic study of esotericism from Mircea Eliade and Henri Corbin up to the early Antoine Faivre and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke used the comparative approach to seek an eternal archetypal reality (see Hanegraaff 2013, 10–11). This “inner dimension” was contrasted to exoteric forms of understanding religion.

In line with a major debate in religious studies, this so-called “religionist” approach to esotericism has been criticized since the 1990s (see Hanegraaff 1995). There has arisen a strictly historical approach that avoids religionist as well as reductionist views

and is based on methodological agnosticism. According to this principle of research, the academic study of religion should neither preclude nor assert religious truth claims. Today comparative research on a religionist basis plays only a marginal role in the professional study of esotericism. It is not that religionist approaches to esotericism have no place in contemporary academy. It is that their truth claims belong to the fields of philosophy of religion and theology and should be discussed within these areas. The following section turns to the dominant conceptualizations of esotericism as a historical phenomenon.

The Faivre/Hanegraaff Paradigm: Western Esotericism as an Umbrella Term for Rejected Historical Currents and as Form of Thought

It is no exaggeration to say that it was Antoine Faivre who established historical esotericism as a domain of academic research. In his *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (1994), he created a narrative of Western esotericism as a cluster of older historical currents like Hellenistic Platonism, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and Jewish Kabbalah that had been connected for the first time in the Renaissance and then creatively developed until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Major strands within this cultural sphere are the occult sciences, Hermeticism, Christian Kabbalah, Paracelsism, Rosicrucianism, Christian Theosophy (Jacob Böhme and the theologians inspired by him) as well as parts of German Romantic philosophy influenced by Christian theosophy and mesmerism (Schelling, Baader, Eschenmayer). According to Faivre, esotericism stayed alive through the present day not least because of the organizations of nineteenth-century occultism like Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. Faivre not only developed a historical survey of Western esotericism but also contributed to the clarification of key terms as "theosophy" or "Hermeticism." Additionally, he extracted a form of thought (*forme de pensée*) from his sources that he deems typical for Western esotericism. It is based on four necessary ("intrinsic") and two optional components. The four intrinsic characteristics are:

- 1 The concept of correspondences existing between all parts of the cosmos (the famous hermetic "as above, so below").
- 2 The understanding of nature as being alive as a whole and in all of its parts, "often inhabited and traversed by a [divine, KB] light or hidden fire circulating through it" (Faivre 1994, 11).
- 3 The central function of imagination for the use of intermediaries like intermediary spirits, rituals, and images in order to gain insight into the secrets of the universe. Imagination is considered to be a power of cognition superior to the rational mind.
- 4 The idea of transmutation. Esotericists conceive themselves as being on a pilgrimage to a higher plane of existence and an illuminated knowledge that can only be gained if the whole person is transformed.

The two optional components are:

- 1 The conviction that some, if not all, religious traditions share a common kernel of truth. It became especially important within Renaissance esotericism and again in nineteenth-century occultism.
- 2 Forms of transmission of experiential insights from master to disciple that follow an established path of teaching and successive stages of initiation (see Faivre 1994, 10–15).

This twofold concept of Western esotericism consists of (1) historical currents manifesting themselves in a vast amount of literature that has not secured the academic attention it deserves and (2) a specific way of thinking. Hanegraaff bases his narrative on the same historical currents as Faivre and, like him, supplements his historical view with the view of esotericism as a way of thinking. This second part of the concept of “Western esotericism” is not so prominent in his work as in Faivre’s.

Faivre’s construction of Western esotericism includes specific idiosyncrasies and imbalances that Hanegraaff interprets as influenced by Faivre’s own practice of the Masonic high-degree system of the Rectified Scottish Rite. His anti-dualistic and anti-idealistic focus on the incarnational Christology of Christian Theosophy rejects dualistic forms of esotericism like the doctrine of the *Lectorium Rosicrucianum* or Guénonian Traditionalism (see Hanegraaff 2012, 354) that nevertheless should be treated as full-fledged esotericism. Faivre’s bias also excludes popular forms of esotericism like those found at contemporary esoteric fairs and in special esoteric shops, not to speak of the diffusion of esoteric images and ideas into popular culture that has been called “occulture” (see Partridge 2013). As Faivre considers early modern Christian theosophy as the prototype and climax of esotericism, he is, according to Hanegraaff, unable to acknowledge sufficiently post-Enlightenment forms of esotericism from the nineteenth century on.

This last deficiency was the starting point of Hanegraaff’s own research. In his first main work he gave historical depth to the New Age movement of the second half of the twentieth century by unearthing its roots within Western esotericism (see Hanegraaff 1996). Influenced by Max Weber’s (1864–1920) theory of modernization, he refers to disenchantment and rationalization as major forces within modern Western culture. He interprets nineteenth-century occultism as an adaption of esotericism to the disenchanted world and the New Age as a further step within this ongoing transformation of older esoteric currents. In recent times Egil Asprem (2014a) has shown that the relation between the disenchantment within modern European societies and esoteric currents is more complex.

In response to what he perceives as “realist” and “essentialist” inclinations of Faivre’s concept of esotericism, Hanegraaff uncovered the genealogy of the modern understanding of esotericism as “the dustbin of rejected knowledge” within Western culture (see Hanegraaff 2013, 13). A closer look discloses that Hanegraaff does not refer to “rejected knowledge” in general but to certain strands of Western European religious thought that he considers as having been repressed and marginalized.

He showed that the origins of esotericism as a cluster of rejected religious currents are to be found within an influential group of seventeenth-century Lutheran theologians and philosophers such as Jacob Thomasius and Daniel Colberg (see Hanegraaff 2012, especially 77–153). These figures harshly criticized what they perceived to be a pagan-influenced Christianity that spoiled the original Christian faith. From their point of view the heretical Hellenization of Christianity through Platonic and Hermetic philosophy had already started in Patristic times and was still at work in the Protestant theologies of Paracelsus and Christian Theosophy, the Rosicrucians, and astrology as well as Renaissance natural magic. Daniel Colberg labeled all this *platonisch-hermetisches Christentum* and doing so, according to Hanegraaff, coined a historiographical category that corresponds quite exactly to what was later called “esotericism” (see Hanegraaff 2012, 101–120). The polemics against these forms of Christianity influenced Enlightenment thinkers, who utilized them for propagating a rational scientific world view pitted against obsolete irrational beliefs. Hanegraaff points out that through European colonialism this opposition has been globalized.

Conversely, Gottfried Arnold, in his *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie* from 1699/1700, and other members of the Pietist movement appreciated the very Platonic-Hermetic currents that Colberg had anathematized and thus in Hanegraaff’s construction created the prototype for a religionist understanding of esotericism as a suppressed and forgotten ancient wisdom tradition (see Hanegraaff 2012, 120–127). As Michael Stausberg already noticed, Hanegraaff uses Arnold’s “impartial history” for his own more biased historical views by referring to only those theologians and currents that fit into the Faivre/Hanegraaff paradigm. Arnold develops a more comprehensive historiography of Christian heresies and fringe theologies within which the esoteric currents in the sense of Faivre/Hanegraaff are of comparably minor importance (see Stausberg 2013, 225–226).

According to Hanegraaff, as a reaction to the polemics of Enlightenment thinkers, the dispute on “rejected knowledge” became even more contentious and those who identified themselves with esotericism began to understand themselves as members of a counter-culture:

In this regard, as in so many others, the Enlightenment was a caesura that changed the rules of the game. After the eighteenth century, esoteric authors tend to become more aggressive in presenting their “higher knowledge” as superior *alternative* to the claims of traditional Christianity and mainstream science, and not just as an extra level built on the foundations that they provide. For example, Mme Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877) consists of a virulent polemic against established “science” (vol. I) and “religion” (vol. II), claiming that her “occult science” of theosophy has existed since times immemorial as the superior alternative to the positivistic worldview and the traditional Christianity of her time. (Hanegraaff 2013a, 91)

At first sight, Hanegraaff’s historical deconstruction of the notion of Western esotericism has no affinity with Faivre’s typological considerations that try to unite the diffuse cluster of rejected theories and practices that since the nineteenth century has

been called “esotericism” by a form of thought as internal characteristic. But already in his earliest publications, Hanegraaff, inspired by the Dutch theologian and historian Gilles Quispel, distinguishes three ideal types of knowledge as heuristic tools to describe Western cultural identity: (a) doctrinal faith (represented by institutional Christianity); (b) reason (discursive knowledge dominant within philosophical and scientific rationalism); and (c) gnosis (direct salvational access to ultimate reality represented by Western esotericism) (see Hanegraaff 1996, 518–519; 2008; 2012, 372). Whereas in Faivre’s concept of esoteric thought the mediation of knowledge and imagination as source of insight plays a central role, in Hanegraaff’s model the immediacy of direct experiential knowledge is put at the fore. He thereby highlights an aspect that in mysticism research often has been attributed to mystical religiosity. As far as I can see, the relationship between esotericism and mysticism has not been clarified yet, neither by Hanegraaff nor by any other scholar of esotericism (compare the unsatisfactory religionist approach in Magee 2016).

In contrast to Quispel and Faivre, Hanegraaff stresses that his three types of knowledge are analytical categories and do not map historical realities. All of them can be found in Christian churches and theologies, science and philosophy, and Western esotericism. It is only the degree of emphasis that makes the difference between one domain and another (see Hanegraaff 2008, 139): “Western Esotericism does not necessarily entail a simple rejection of ‘reason’ and ‘faith,’ or of their characteristic procedures for finding answers and discovering truth: usually, its representatives state simply that these approaches have their limitations, and only knowledge of the ‘gnosis’ type leads us as far as to the truth itself” (Hanegraaff 2013, 89). Additionally, he sometimes connects “gnosis” with “paganism” and “cosmotheism” (a term he borrowed from Egyptologist Jan Assmann) to identify the core of the rejected knowledge within Western culture.

In recent years Hanegraaff has reduced his three-part scheme to a duality that is strongly reminiscent of a topos of German romanticism: daytime rationality and its cultivated scientific forms versus non-rational, subconscious, or participative thought. He asserts that after the victory of Enlightenment science and rationalism the second became the domain of Western esotericism (see Hanegraaff 2015, 70–83). Hanegraaff proposes to clarify further the non-rational thinking typical for esotericism by using the cognitive science of religion. Compared with the many detailed historical studies, the typological part of the Faivre/Hanegraaff paradigm is less developed and is not yet in a satisfactory condition.

Faivre and Hanegraaff define esotericism as a specifically “Western” phenomenon. They give several reasons. First, they want to overcome the religionist use of comparisons to prove the “esoteric core” of all religions. Against this backdrop, the introduction of the adjective “Western” was meant to underline that esotericism should be understood as a particular historical current and not as trans-historical essence of all religion. “The term stands in opposition not so much to ‘Eastern’ (or ‘Northern’ or ‘Southern’) esotericism as to universal esotericism” (Asprem 2014b, 8). Today this move looks outdated, as the dispute over the religionist claim to esotericism underlying all religions ended years ago. One may also doubt whether the choice of the term “Western” was a

lucky decision, as “Western” as a non-geographical but cultural category is usually constructed as the other of the cultural “East” and thus has to carry the heavy burden of Orientalism. Additionally, the rejection of a comparative study of esotericism tied to the focus on “Western” history does not take into account the already mentioned refined methods of comparison practiced in the contemporary study of religions (see Asprem 2014b, 5). The comparative study of religions is, of course, not necessarily connected to a religionist agenda.

Additionally, Faivre complains that since the beginning of the twentieth century a new form of “monist spiritualism” emerged, “in which Nature (the created world) is neglected, even denied in its reality by the influence of Oriental, especially Hindu, doctrines” (Faivre 1994, 12). This remark suggests that he accepts the classic Orientalist cliché of “Oriental” religions as world-denying.

By contrast, Hanegraaff supports the notion of a distinctively Western esotericism with historiographical arguments. As early as 1996 he stated that “Oriental ideas and concepts have, almost without exception, been adopted only insofar as they could be assimilated into already-existing western frameworks. This has been the pattern in Western esotericism since the beginning, and I know of no evidence which suggests that the New Age movement has brought a fundamental change” (Hanegraaff 1996, 517). He continues to maintain this Eurocentric view in his later writings (see Hanegraaff 2015).

Within the Faivre/Hanegraaff paradigm there is no place for non-European agency. Western esotericism is the sole historical agent that expands globally and thereby appropriates whatever fits its Western frames. Non-Western cultures are not able to contribute something to it and to change its course. They function only as passive receivers. Nevertheless, research on modern yoga and on other fields of cross-cultural interactions among Near and Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian as well as African cultures and European or American esoteric currents reveal globally entangled developments (see Baier 2016; Bergunder 2016). Besides regional research that focuses on Europe and the United States, contemporary studies increasingly focus on those intercultural processes and forms of esotericism that are global in their origin. In the wake of these developments the denominative “Western” becomes obsolete (see Roukema and Kilner-Johnson 2018).

Concluding Remarks

At the moment, esotericism research is undergoing a profound change. After decades of fruitful work under the patronage of the historiographic paradigm of “Western esotericism,” comparative studies have re-emerged. Additionally, methods of the social sciences and cognitive science are gaining importance. There is a shift from the “Western” toward postcolonial perspectives and global religious history. The counter-cultural aura of the field is about to decrease, and the content of what has been conceived of as “dustbin of rejected knowledge” in the end may disclose itself as a collection of currents among many other interconnected systems of knowledge

(see von Stuckrad 2016, 179–180) that was less marginalized and oppressed and culturally more influential than one might imagine. Esotericism thus has a good chance of remaining one of the most thrilling areas of religious studies. Many white spots on the map of both historical and contemporary esotericism are still waiting to be explored.

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