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Ancient Esotericism, Problematic Assumptions, and Conceptual Trouble

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Abstract

The article critiques the idea that what scholars today call “Western esotericism” emerged only after the “Renaissance”. It argues that for an understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped the construction of esoteric knowledge and counter-knowledge, the ancient world is crucial in two ways: First, ancient cultures provide a rich spectrum of polemical discourses of knowledge in philosophy and religion, most of them prefiguring the discursive constellations of subsequent centuries. Second, the ancient world is a huge imaginal space that has influenced identities of nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors, including leading theorists of mysticism, secrecy, and esotericism

Keywords

esotericism – theory and method – Renaissance – antiquity

The question whether it is useful to apply the term ‘esotericism’ to sources from the ancient and medieval periods has become a matter of ideology in the study of esotericism. A whole field of research has been formed around the idea that ‘Western esotericism’ is something that emerged in the ‘Renaissance’, and that everything before the fifteenth century could only be regarded as a preparatory step for what was to become esotericism. This is quite remarkable, because such a differentiation has never occurred with reference to closely related terms such as ‘secrecy’ or ‘mysticism’.¹ What is it about ‘esotericism’

1 See also Burns, ‘Ancient Esoteric Traditions’.

that makes it a phenomenon of the post-medieval period, according to some authors? It cannot be the term itself, as the notion of ‘esotericism’ (or, rather, the German and French equivalents) came into use only around 1800, and at that time it was applied quite differently than scholars would have it two-hundred years later.² On the other side of the time-line, we may note that the terms “esoteric” and “exoteric” were already in use in ancient times.³

While the differentiation of historical periods is a problematic exercise of construction in general,⁴ the nineteenth-century invention of the ‘Renaissance’ as a ‘watershed’ in European history, which not only revived the ancient world but also prepared Europe for the step into ‘modernity’, has been particularly influential in what was to become the study of esotericism.⁵ Scholars of esotericism habitually underestimate the continuities between ‘late antiquity’, the ‘Middle Ages’, and the ‘Renaissance’, which leads them to a distorted understanding of the Renaissance as the ‘birthplace of esotericism’. The period between 600 and 1300 was a highly productive—and pluralistic—time in terms of philosophical, scientific, and religious discourses, and many concepts that gained influence in the fifteenth century had their origin in those ‘dark Middle Ages’. Prominent examples for the study of esotericism are Hermeticism, magic, and astrology.⁶

Why is it so difficult to implement these theoretical considerations in the academic study of esotericism? An important reason is the fact that the field of ‘Western esotericism’ has been strongly influenced by Antoine Faivre’s definition of esotericism, which is based on a concrete historical constellation in early modern Europe; in a circular argument, everything that does not fit this historical constellation cannot be regarded as esotericism ‘in the strict sense’.⁷ In a critical analysis, and after a re-evaluation of Faivre’s approach, many scholars have noted that the ingredients of what is studied as ‘esotericism’ are part and parcel of contested European identities that strive to define themselves

2 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 335–337.

3 Riffard, *L’ésotérisme*, 63–88; Gaiser, ‘Platons esoterische Lehre’.

4 Herzog and Koselleck, *Epochemschwelle und Epochenbewußtsein*. On the genealogy of concepts of time and history after the fifteenth century see also Landwehr, *Frühe Neue Zeiten*.

5 Stierle, ‘Renaissance’. On the problem of ‘Renaissance paganism’ and the prominent role of art historians in this debate see von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 157–163.

6 Von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 21–23; as a problematization of Christian biases in the study of astrology and other systems of knowledge in the construction of the ‘Middle Ages’ see von Stuckrad, ‘Interreligious Transfers in the Middle Ages’, 34–38.

7 As critical reflection on the study of ‘Western esotericism’ see von Stuckrad, ‘Esoteric/Esotericism’.

in polemical distinction to what they reject. Paganism is defined as the Other of Christianity, mysticism as the Other of rationality, magic as the Other of science, astrology as the Other of astronomy, and so on. These polemical discourses are intrinsically connected to knowledge, and hence it is not surprising that many scholars of esotericism use the theoretical vocabulary provided by the sociology of knowledge to better understand the complex dynamics that are operative in European cultural history as well as its scholarly imagination. Whether we refer to “rejected knowledge” (Hanegraaff) or use my own notion of “claims of perfect knowledge” to capture esoteric discourses, a shift of focus from a concrete historical constellation (Faivre’s theosophical discourses in Christian milieus) to a more structural understanding of polemical discourses and identity work remains crucial.

This is where antiquity comes into play. For an understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped the construction of esoteric knowledge and counter-knowledge, the ancient world is crucial in two ways: First, ancient cultures provide a rich spectrum of polemical discourses of knowledge in philosophy and religion, most of them prefiguring the discursive constellations of subsequent centuries. This is particularly true when it comes to the many forms of Christian knowledge claims.⁸ The difficulties of distinguishing Roman, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, Manichaean, Mandaean, and Islamic discourses is another case in point; only if we leave behind overly simplistic constructions of these ‘traditions’ we will be able to see the many cross-fertilizations and polemical distinctions that have determined European history.

Second, the ancient world is a huge imaginal space. This was already the case in antiquity,⁹ but in subsequent periods the ancient world continued to be a strong identity marker, drafted in the service of rejecting or authorizing ideas. The latest chapter of this imagination is the knowledge that has been produced in academia, following the institutionalization and professionalization of academic research in the disciplines of religious studies, historiography, anthropology, psychology, etc. around 1900. In these disciplines, intellectuals reorganized the knowledge of Europe’s past in a way that catered to their own

8 See, for instance, Ginzburg, ‘High and Low’.

9 In the Roman Empire the knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics was almost lost and these traditions were constructed as an ‘esoteric’ knowledge of scribes and magicians; conversely, Orientalism was very much present in Greek and Roman culture (see Burns, *Apocalypse*, 20–28); Hermes was a mythical figure that could easily be blended with Zoroaster, Metatron, or even Abraham; examples could be multiplied.

cultural contexts, particularly their strong concerns about the development of European ‘modernity’. In doing so, they paved the way for an academic study of esotericism, and at the same time they provided a blueprint for religious and spiritual practices in the twentieth century, of which the so-called ‘New Age’ is only one example.¹⁰

That is why we need to study esoteric discourses in antiquity. The ancient world is alive in the present. We need an integral approach to see the many unexpected continuities, breaks, and shifting identities in the construction of esoteric knowledge through the centuries.

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¹⁰ These processes are the main topic of von Stuckrad, *Scientification of Religion*.

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