Vocabulary for the Study of Religion

Volume 1

A–E

Edited by

Robert A. Segal
Kocku von Stuckrad

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ALEX LAW

Eschatology

→ Apocalypse

Esoteric / Esotericism

The adjective "esoteric" is derived from the Greek *esôteros* ("inward," "secret," "restricted to an inner circle"). Its contrasting term, "exoteric," was already used in ancient Greek philosophy, especially by Plato (Gaiser 1988; Riffard 1990: 65). Since ancient times, usage of the term "esoteric" has put emphasis on secrecy and concealment of religious and philosophical knowledge. Lucian of Samosata (second century C.E.) used the concept in this way in his satire *Vitarum Rustio* 26. Christian authors, among them Clement of Alexandria, Hippolyte of Rome, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, subsequently applied the term similarly, with Pythagoreanism serving as a prominent example of such a secret mystical teaching (Riffard 1990: 63–88).

As a noun, "esotericism" made its entrance into European languages much later. It was around 1800 that German and French authors coined the terms *Esoterik* and *l'ésotérisme*. While still relating the term to the Pythagorean tradition, these authors depicted the "esotericists" not only as belonging to a mystical, secret community but also as rationalists and Freethinkers (Hanegraaff 2012: 335–337). The concept was then linked to terms that have similar connotations, such as "mysticism" and "gnosis," and also to "paganism" and "Hermeticism." In these constellations, the term became popular during the first half of the twentieth century,

often as a counter-concept against more orthodox Christian doctrines and the emergence of what was seen as a "rationalist modernity." Influential intellectuals who helped popularize the respective terms were connected to the "Eranos circle" (e.g., Carl Gustav Jung, Wolfgang Pauli, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, and Gershom Scholem) and to an attempt to re-evaluate the influence of Hermeticism on the formation of modern science and culture, with Frances A. Yates being the most prominent author in this regard (Wasserstrom 1999; Hanegraaff 2012: 257–334; Rudbøg 2013; von Stuckrad 2014).

The Academic Discussion

When it comes to the academic usage of the term "esotericism," French research after World War II played a particularly important role. Scholars turned away from understandings of "esotericism" as synonyms of secrecy and concealment, and they developed "esotericism" as an historiographical concept closely related to new interpretations of nineteenth-century illuminism, theosophy, and occultism. This development culminated in the work of Antoine Faivre, who can be seen as one of the founders of the new academic field of "Western esotericism." Faivre, himself deeply rooted in an attempt to "remythologize" the "disenchanted modern world" (Hanegraaff 2012: 334–355), developed a typological definition of "esotericism" that became a point of reference for other scholars. He defined esotericism as a "form of thought," which consists of four "intrinsic," i.e. necessary, and two "relative" characteristics: (1) the idea of correspondences; (2) the concept of living nature; (3) imagination and mediations; (4) the experience of transmutation; (5) the praxis of concordance; and (6) the notion of transmission (Faivre 1994: 1–19). This taxonomy of esotericism has received a lot of attention and has been the subject of controversial debate over the years (see von Stuckrad 2010: 46–49); but twenty years after the launch of Faivre's definition, we can observe that there are very few scholars in the

field today who apply this taxonomy the way Faivre first intended it. Faivre's main achievement was to help establish the notion of esotericism in an academic context. A discernible academic field emerged, and scholars produced many specialized publications, including a dictionary (Hanegraaff 2005) and a number of books that give an overview of the history of esotericism (von Stuckrad 2005; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; Faivre 2010; Hanegraaff 2013).

Theoretical Challenges

There are many theoretical challenges to the academic study of esotericism. To begin with, scholars who use the term "Western esotericism" need to explain what "Western" means in their approach. Many of the phenomena studied under the umbrella term of esotericism have been part of the entangled histories of Europe and Asia since antiquity, which means that a serious study of "Western" esotericism needs to catch up to post-colonial studies and theoretical debates about Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, and Occidentalism (Samuel and Johnston 2013 is one of the rare examples of a publication that addresses these issues).

But even if we drop the adjective "Western," it has proven difficult to find a referential framework that combines the many and diverse phenomena, currents, and traditions studied under the rubric of esotericism. This spectrum includes, but is not limited to, what the academic journal *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (Brill) defines as its scope:

> *Aries* is the first professional academic journal specifically devoted to a long-neglected but now rapidly developing new domain of research in the humanities, usually referred to as "Western Esotericism". This field covers a variety of "alternative" currents in western religious history, including the so-called "hermetic philosophy" and related currents in the early modern period; alchemy, para-

celsianism and rosicrucianism; christian kabbalah and its later developments; theosophical and illuminist currents; and various occultist and related developments during the 19th and 20th centuries, up to and including popular contemporary currents such as the New Age movement. (www.brill.com/aries, capitalization and grammar original; accessed 15 July 2014)

Other scholars of "Western esotericism" include under this rubric the study of the ancient Mediterranean and medieval European cultures, and Jewish and Islamic esotericism, as well as the many forms of contemporary esotericism and paganism (see Asprem and Granholm 2013).

Esotericism, Attributions of Meaning, and Polemical Identity Work

Many scholars have observed that most of the topics studied under the rubric of esotericism are part of European "identity work," which polemically constructs the "Other" in an attempt to define the "Own"—e.g., paganism as the Other of Christianity, magic as the Other of science, mysticism as the Other of rationality, and so on. What is more, the concept of knowledge plays a paramount role in esoteric contexts, be it as "rejected knowledge" (Hanegraaff) or as "claims of perfect knowledge" (von Stuckrad). In an attempt to find theoretical backing for such an observation and a vocabulary to frame such an analysis, scholars have turned to cultural studies in general, and to discourse analysis and the sociology of knowledge in particular. What does this mean?

Discursive approaches to the study of religion explore how attributions of meaning to historical phenomena create shared consensus and accepted knowledge in a given society or peer-group, resulting in a social reality that recursively stabilizes the attributions of meaning (see von Stuckrad 2014: 1–18). As applied to esotericism, we can distinguish three variants of discursive analysis. The first variant would investigate all instances of the use of the

term "esotericism" (and its equivalents in various European languages), put them in their historical contexts, and proceed with an analysis of how this attribution of meaning has influenced particular social realities and commonly accepted knowledge (cf. Bergunder 2010). This analysis includes "tacit knowledge," such as the idea that science is better than magic or that Christianity is the basis of European culture. An excellent example of such an approach is Wouter J. Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy* (2012), even though the discursive dimension of his study remains implicit.

The second variant is very similar, but this type of analysis also looks at the links that the historical sources make between the concept of esotericism and other terms and concepts. The result is an analysis of "discursive knots" and "discourse strands" that constitute the meaning of esotericism, a meaning that can change over time depending on the shifting constellations of discourse strands. (As an example of such an analysis, see von Stuckrad 2014; see also the "concepts often associated with Western esotericism" in Rudbøg 2013: 33; Hanegraaff 2012 also provides a lot of material for such an analysis.)

The third way of applying a discursive analysis would be to give a new name to a "grouping" (see Foucault 2010 [1972]: 29) of discourse strands, even if the name of that grouping is not part of the discourse being studied. Scholars could call a grouping of discourses "esotericism" (or they could choose any other term), which may include, for instance, discourses of perfect knowledge, paganism, Platonism, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, magic, occultism, secrecy, or whatever scholars regard as appropriate to their historical analysis. In this approach, it is thus not necessary that all sources speak of "esotericism" in order to contribute to a discourse on esotericism (or, rather, a discursive grouping of esotericism). Of course, scholars need to explain on the basis of historical evidence why they include certain discourse strands in their groupings and not others.

All three approaches have advantages and disadvantages, but they are all capable of providing an analytical framework for the study of esotericism.

How Sustainable is the Study of Esotericism?

All scholarly discussions about esotericism refer in one way or another to the prominent place of knowledge (claims), to dynamics of polemical inclusion and exclusion, and to processes of European (or "Western") identity work. Therefore it is only natural that cultural studies and discursive approaches in historiography provide the most useful vocabularies for the study of esotericism, and that many scholars of esotericism are exploring these vocabularies today. It remains to be seen whether other theoretical frameworks will be established in the future. Given the huge spectrum of topics, themes, periods, and disciplines combined in the study of esotericism, it will be essential that the field develop a vocabulary that provides a larger frame of reference for individual research if it is to be sustainable. Without such a theoretical framework, the study of esotericism will remain an academic niche and may even dissolve. If it is not clear to students of religion and culture what the added value of the term "esotericism" is, they will turn to other categories, subsequently merging the study of esotericism with larger disciplinary units.

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Kocku von Stuckrad

Ethnicity

Both Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan in the introduction to their edited volume *Ethnicity* (1975: 1) and Werner Sollors in *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986: 21–24) argue that the term "ethnicity" is of rather recent vintage. Sollors contends that it became part of the language of sociology only with the appearance of W. Lloyd Warner's classic study of Newburyport, Massachusetts, particularly the volume coauthored with Leo Srole, which inquired into the process of adjustment and absorption of the second- and third-generation offspring of immigrants who arrived in the United States between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the passage of immigration restriction legislation in 1924 (Warner and Srole 1945).

The term caught on in no small part as a rejection of racial categorizations, which were associated with the Nazis. Not long after the Yankee City works Everett C. Hughes characterized the term "ethnic group" as "a colorless catch-all much used by anthropologists and sociologists" (1971 [1948]: 153). The adjective "ethnic" had actually been used at least a century earlier than "ethnicity" or "ethnic group," but it was not widespread till the publication of William Graham Sumner's *Folkways* (1906).

But what exactly do the terms "ethnic," "ethnicity," and "ethnic group" mean? Ethnicity is often used loosely to mean a shared history, including shared traditions, values, symbols, and material culture; a common geographical origin or homeland; a common language; a collective religious identity; a subjective sense of group identity; and a perception of the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Some would add characteristics to the list, and others would delete characteristics—for example, ignoring the cultural "stuff" and concentrating solely on group boundaries.

An early and oft-quoted formulation of ethnic group comes from Max Weber, who defines ethnic groups as "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration" (1978: 389). He maintains that the belief may or may not be grounded in "an objective blood relationship." Three features of this definition are notable. First, the ethnic group is a social construct, based on the sentiments and beliefs of its members. Second, racial groups are considered a subset of ethnic groups. To the extent that religious affiliation is an aspect of shared customs, religious identities may reinforce ethnic identities. Ethnic groups and religious groups may be overlapping, intersecting, or unconnected. Third, the emphasis on group members themselves as the sole arbiters of the definition of their group ignores the role of others in imposing group identities on the less powerful and more marginalized sectors of a society—a surprising oversight, given Weber's usual attentiveness to power in social relations.

It is common to compare an ethnic group with a kinship group. Weber did so by contending that "ethnic membership differs from the kinship group precisely by being a presumed identity, not a group