

CHAPTER 11

Esotericism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field

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When graduate students enroll in classes that are devoted to “esotericism” or “Western esotericism,” they usually are fascinated by the class topics, even though they have only a vague idea of what esotericism means. They are curious to learn more about magic, alchemy, astrology, paganism, witchcraft, or shamanism. These students are positively surprised that, apparently, some academics seriously study subjects such as Harry Potter, the Matrix, the Kabbalah Center, Ayahuasca mysticism, Wicca, and Black Metal, as well as seemingly unorthodox traditions such as the ancient gnostics, magical amulets from the Middle Ages, astrological calculations of the end of the world, and the quest to find the language of the angels.

It takes only a few weeks of classes for many students to realize that they have entered a territory that still lacks a reliable map. There are hints and signs here and there, but students must find their own way in a terrain that is full of pitfalls and quagmires. They also realize that they are not alone; their tutors find themselves in the same position, only they have more experience and have already gone through many discussions and expeditions. This uncertainty makes for a vibrant class, as students explore new areas and learn to think differently about many topics that most people take for granted regarding the cultural history of Europe and North America.

This chapter discusses two challenges in this field of study that need to be addressed. The first relates to controversial theoretical and methodological issues and the second to strategic and political issues.

DISPUTE 1: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

One of the first surprises for students is a marked difference between the popular, or common, use of the term *esotericism* and much of its academic use. Whereas the popular understanding of *esoteric* is straightforward and usually implies insider or secret knowledge, academic discussions have sometimes avoided linking esotericism to secrecy. Antoine Faivre (1934–), regarded as one of the founders of the field of Western esotericism, writes in the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* that the “notion of secrecy is often associated with that of esotericism, even to the point of reducing the sense of this latter term to that of

the former. The typological meaning of ‘esotericism’ as referring to secrecy should, however, be clearly distinguished from the historical meaning used in the present reference work and increasingly in general academic parlance” (Faivre 2005, 1056). Similarly, the historian of religion Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1961–) notes that “emphases on secrecy and interiority can certainly be found within quite a few of the historical currents [of esotericism], but they are absent in many others, and therefore cannot be seen as defining characteristics” (Hanegraaff 2005, 338).

Thus, although it may be useful to distinguish theoretically between esotericism and secrecy, the emphasis on this difference has led to a certain disregard of secrecy in the academic study of esotericism (see von Stuckrad 2010, 54–59). The situation becomes even messier because many other scholars simply ignore this differentiation and apply the popular definitions, identifying esotericism with secrecy and concealment. This lack of a coherent approach to basic concepts for the study of esotericism is a problem that needs to be addressed openly for the benefit of future research in this field.

FORMATION OF ESOTERICISM RESEARCH

After World War II, French scholars in particular developed esotericism as a historiographical concept that was closely related to new interpretations of nineteenth-century illuminism (which offered individual enlightenment to its members), theosophy, and occultism. This development culminated in the work of Antoine Faivre. In attempting to “re-mythologize” the “disenchanted modern world” (Hanegraaff 2012, 334–355), Faivre developed a definition of esotericism that became a point of reference for other scholars. He defined esotericism as a “form of thought” that has four “intrinsic,” or necessary, characteristics—the idea of correspondences; the concept of living nature; imagination and mediations; and the experience of transmutation—and two “relative” characteristics: the praxis of concordance; and the notion of transmission (Faivre 1994, 1–19).

This taxonomy has received much attention and has been the subject of heated debate (see von Stuckrad 2010, 46–49), but twenty years after Faivre stated his definition, few scholars in the field apply this taxonomy the way Faivre intended it. Some scholars and students choose a few of Faivre’s characteristics and apply them to various cases, often disregarding Faivre’s assertion that only phenomena possessing all four characteristics should be labeled “esotericism.” Most scholars use whatever they think is appropriate for their research, often applying the common, popular notion of esotericism as synonymous with secrecy and closed social groups.

In the end, Faivre’s main achievement was to help establish the notion of esotericism in an academic context. A discernible academic field has emerged. Scholars have produced many specialized publications, including dictionaries (Hanegraaff 2005) and books (von Stuckrad 2005; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; Faivre 2010; Hanegraaff 2013; Rudbøg 2013), that give an overview of the history of esotericism. Students can use these works as signposts to orient themselves in the field, but usually it does not take them long to find out that the signs are pointing in different directions. Indeed, many questions remain unresolved. The most important questions relate to demarcations of esotericism (both in time and geography) and to the proper approaches to studying and interpreting material.

WHEN DID ESOTERICISM BEGIN?

Is it useful to apply the term *esotericism* to sources from the ancient and medieval periods? The answer to this seemingly innocent question has almost become a matter of ideology.

A significant faction has formed around the idea that Western esotericism emerged from the Renaissance and that everything before the fifteenth century was only a preparatory step for esotericism proper. This idea is counterintuitive because such a differentiation has never been made with closely related terms such as *secrecy* or *mysticism*. What is it about esotericism that makes it a phenomenon of the postmedieval period, according to some authors?

While the differentiation of historical periods is a problematic exercise of construction in general (see Herzog and Koselleck 1987), the nineteenth-century invention of the Renaissance as a watershed in European history, the period that 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 (see Stierle 1987; on the problem of “Renaissance paganism” and the prominent role of art historians in this debate, see von Stuckrad 2010, 157–163). Underestimating the continuities between late antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance often leads scholars to a distorted understanding of the Renaissance as the birthplace of esotericism. However, the period between 600 and 1400 was a highly productive—and pluralistic—time in terms of philosophical, scientific, and religious discourses. 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, astrology, and Islamic and Jewish readings of Platonism.

Why is it so difficult to implement these theoretical considerations in the academic study of esotericism? An important reason is that the formative period of this field was strongly influenced by Antoine Faivre’s definition of esotericism, which was based on a concrete historical context in early modern Europe; in a circular argument, everything that does not fit this historical situation cannot be regarded as esotericism in the strict sense. That is why, for instance, the influential *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Hanegraaff, Faivre, van den Broek, and Brach 2005) marginalizes Jewish and Islamic esotericism: Jewish authors and intellectual traditions are lumped together under the lemma “Jewish Influences,” and Islamic contributions are neglected almost completely. A closer look at the issue shows that the same dynamics that shaped cultural and religious constellations were current both during the Renaissance and in earlier periods.

Ancient and Medieval Contributions. Ancient and medieval cultures are crucial for our understanding of esotericism in two ways. First, ancient cultures provide a rich spectrum of polemical debates in philosophy and religion, most of them prefiguring the constellations of subsequent centuries. This is particularly true of the many forms of Christian knowledge claims (see Ginzburg 1976 for a thought-provoking analysis). The difficulties of distinguishing Roman, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Jewish, Christian, gnostic, Manichaean, Mandaean, and Islamic sources is another case in point; only by leaving behind the overly simplistic constructions of these traditions is one able to see the many cross-pollinations and polemic distinctions that have determined European history.

Second, the ancient and medieval worlds are a huge space of imagination and projection. This was already the case in antiquity: in the Roman Empire the knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics was almost lost, and these traditions became the specialized knowledge of scribes and magicians. Conversely, orientalism was prominent in Greek and Roman culture (see Burns 2014, 20–28); Hermes was a mythical figure that could easily be blended with Zoroaster, Metatron, or even Abraham; indeed, these examples are but a few.

Recent Contributions. In subsequent periods the ancient world continued to be a strong identity marker that was 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 religious studies, historiography, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines around 1900. In these disciplines, intellectuals reorganized the knowledge of Europe's past in a way that catered to their own 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 also provided a blueprint for religious and spiritual practices in the twentieth century, of which the so-called New Age is only one example (on these processes, see von Stuckrad 2014).

HOW "WESTERN" IS ESOTERICISM?

In addition to the problems of demarcating esotericism in time, there are problems with spatial borders. What is so Western about esotericism? Some scholars argue that *Western* is somehow used innocently in this combination, simply referring to the fact that most developments under study in the field have their cultural setting in what is seen as the West, that is, Europe and North America (Hanegraaff 2015 is an example of this position). And these authors are quick to admit that the twentieth century witnessed the globalization of Western esotericism.

The problem is much more complex, however. Many phenomena studied under the umbrella term *esotericism* emerged from outside Europe, and not only in the twentieth century. For instance, many doctrines in gnosticism came from the Middle East and Africa, and much of astrology came from India and the Middle East. Knowledge of Buddhism and Hinduism was formative in the making of Europe and cannot be left out of the equation (see the seminal works of Lach 1965–1977 and Halbfass 1988; on Halbfass's influence, see also Franco and Preisendanz 2007).

A pragmatic alternative would be to argue geographically and identify the Mediterranean (including the Near and Middle East), Europe, and—in the modern period—North America as the focal points for the study of esotericism. These are the cultural settings that brought forth the specific ideas we identify as esotericism. But even without the adjective *Western*, the study of esotericism needs to catch up to postcolonial studies and theoretical debates about orientalism, neo-orientalism, and occidentalism (Samuel and Johnston 2013 is one of the rare publications that address these issues). A more rigorous theoretical debate would provide new vocabularies for describing the complexities of cultural exchange and overcome the simplifying dichotomy of *East* versus *West*. One can argue that problematizing dichotomies and juxtapositions is an intrinsic aspect of the study of esotericism; hence it is counterproductive to use the term *Western* to demarcate the field. It may be far more helpful to frame the historical developments in concepts such as *entangled histories*, a term that has emerged from historical and sociocultural anthropological research to describe both sides of the East-West cultural encounter that has shaped the contemporary world (see Epple, Kaltmeier, and Lindner 2011).

EUROPEAN ENTANGLEMENTS

Such an approach is in line with what the scholar of religion Burkhard Gladigow (1939–) and others describe as the characteristics of European history of religion with its mutual dependency of religious, philosophical, scientific, and political discourses. As Gladigow

explains, from late antiquity through the Renaissance and nineteenth-century Romanticism, many traditions that had lost their representation in official religions were continued or revived by philosophy and philologies. Platonism, Hermeticism, and other esoteric traditions were transmitted in the medium of science. What is more, European culture took its alternatives to Christianity mainly from the sciences, as in the romantic philosophy of nature or in the blending of natural sciences with religion at the beginning of the twentieth century (Gladigow 1995, 29; on this approach, see also Kippenberg, Rüpke, and von Stuckrad 2009).

These entanglements of cultural systems—both within Europe and through Europe’s various encounters with other cultures throughout the world—need to be taken into account systematically to properly address the dynamics that created the phenomena of esotericism. An example of entanglements of cultural systems within Europe is magic and its link to religion and science.

Magic, Religion, and Science. Since late antiquity, and particularly in Christian theology, religious—and subsequent legal—discourse effectively criminalized magical *practice*. Magical *theory*, however, had considerable influence on the development of science, mainly because magical theory and philosophy were both interested in understanding nature. The dilemma was that controlling the powers of nature can be a religiously illegal act, but exactly this attempt to control and dominate nature was an important driving force of science. One solution to this dilemma was the invention of the term *magia naturalis* (“natural magic,” in contrast to illicit demonic magic). This term gained currency in the Renaissance, but its origins are late ancient theurgic, Hermetic, and Neoplatonic traditions that were further elaborated by Islamic thinkers.

A cornerstone in this development was the theory of rays that the Islamic scholar al-Kindi (c. 801–873) developed in the ninth century (Travaglia 1999). In the wake of al-Kindi and the great Islamic scholar Avicenna (c. 980–1037), Aristotle’s “imagination” had been interpreted as a power that could modify physical reality. This power was related to the rays of the stars—a power that linked all substances in the cosmos but also ritual actions and words of prayer, or magic. The theory, which built on ancient Stoic theories of *sympatheia*, enabled al-Kindi to explain why prayers had effect and why rituals worked. It also influenced theories of optics, light, and even art in subsequent centuries. This interpretation of nature was picked up by Albertus Magnus, Pietro Pomponazzi, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Agrippa of Nettesheim, Johannes Trithemius, Giovanni Battista della Porta, Giordano Bruno, John Dee, Paracelsus, and many other thinkers of the Renaissance and early modern Europe (von Stuckrad 2010; Coudert 2011).

Looking at this material, which is by no means a fringe, eccentric form of scientific endeavor, the conclusion is unavoidable that in European cultural history magic and science formed a creative couple that was only divorced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—whether at all successfully, is another question (see von Stuckrad 2014).

Defining European Culture. Underlying the discussion about magic and science, as well as many other themes in the field of esotericism, is the ongoing work of identifying European culture: What does it mean to be “modern” or “European”? Is there no more magic, astrology, alchemy, superstition, primitive culture, and so forth, and is it now the age of Enlightenment, science, and rationality? This identity work needs stereotypes to define modern European culture vis-à-vis its “Other.” Paganism is constructed as the Other of

Christianity, magic as the Other of science, mysticism as the Other of rationality, astrology as the Other of astronomy, alchemy as the Other of chemistry, and so on. Esotericism research unpacks these structures and critically looks at the ways European culture has struggled with the questions of self-definition.

In all of these polemical constructions, concepts of knowledge are all-important, as many scholars have observed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff has repeatedly argued that much of esotericism is about “rejected knowledge” (Hanegraaff 2012, 230–239), and I have referred to “claims of perfect knowledge” (von Stuckrad 2010, 59–78) when talking about esoteric cultural constellations. In an attempt to find theoretical backing for such an observation and a vocabulary to frame analysis of how knowledge is negotiated, scholars have turned to cultural studies in general and to discourse analysis and the sociology of knowledge in particular. What does this mean?

DISCOURSE AND MEANING

The term *discourse* is used in different contexts in widely different ways. For the study of esotericism, as suggested in this chapter, the school of discourse research that is influenced by the sociology of knowledge is particularly useful. The sociology of knowledge looks at the attribution and production of knowledge in a given society: what people think is true about the world. Similarly, discursive approaches explore how attributions of meaning to historical phenomena create shared consensus and accepted knowledge in societies or peer groups. This results in a social reality that in turn stabilizes the attributions of meaning (see von Stuckrad 2014, 1–18; Wijsen and von Stuckrad 2016). For instance, if it is a shared knowledge in twentieth-century Europe that astrology is not scientific, and if astrology is not taught in scientific university programs, this reality in turn stabilizes the knowledge about astrology and science, even though nobody feels the need to think about the argumentative basis of such a construction.

These approaches look at discourses as communicative structures that organize knowledge in a given community. Discourses establish, stabilize, and legitimize systems of meaning and provide collectively shared orders of knowledge in an institutionalized social setting; they are statements, utterances, and opinions about a specific topic that are systematically organized and repeatedly observable.

Three Discursive Analyses on Esotericism. As applied to esotericism, discursive analysis takes three forms.

Discursive Analysis 1. The first variant would investigate all uses of the term *esotericism* (and its equivalents in various European languages), put them in their historical context, and analyze how this attribution of meaning has influenced particular social realities and commonly accepted knowledge (compare Bergunder 2010). This analysis includes tacit (i.e., implicit or unstated) knowledge, such as the idea that science is better than magic or that Christianity is the basis of European culture. An example of such an approach is Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy* (2012), even though Hanegraaff himself would not describe his work as belonging to the field of discourse research.

Discursive Analysis 2. The second variant is 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 notions. It analyzes the “discursive knots” and “discourse strands” that constitute the changing meaning of esotericism. The following passage from *Isis Unveiled*

by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) shows some of these strands. In this quote by one of the most influential esoteric authors of the late nineteenth century, the underlined terms represent the discourse strands that are at stake when it comes to the semantic field of esotericism, which Blavatsky combined most creatively (in this case science, secrecy, vitalism, kabbalah, nature, mystery, and matter):

It has been the speculation of men of science from time immemorial what this vital force or life-principle is. To our mind the “secret doctrine” alone is able to furnish the clew. Exact science recognizes only five powers in nature—one *molar*, and four *molecular*; kabalists, seven; and in these two additional ones is enwrapped the whole mystery of life. One of these is immortal spirit, whose reflection is connected by invisible links even with inorganic matter; the other, we leave to every one to discover for himself. (Blavatsky [1877] 2006, 1: 419)

In this specific combination, the concepts (or discourse strands) received new meaning because of their changing entanglements, or grouping. This new combination of discourse strands, confirmed by many other authors, influenced how people in the early twentieth century looked at science, religion, and nature (for a more detailed analysis, see von Stuckrad 2014, 56–75, 94–112; for a useful list of terms for such an analysis, see also the “concepts often associated with Western esotericism” in Rudbøg 2013, 33).

Discursive Analysis 3: Foucauldian Archaeology. A third way of analyzing discourse is inspired by the work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), who pioneered the critical reconstruction of the “genealogy” of what people think is real, true, and valid. Foucault also refers to this as the “archaeology” of orders of knowledge. Looking at the genealogy of orders of knowledge means to identify the ingredients of these discourses and to trace the underlying ideas and concepts back in time. The third variant of a discourse analysis takes this even further and gives new labels to combinations of discourse strands, something Foucault calls “grouping.” Foucault explains that his analysis aims to free thoughts about reality from the groupings “that purport to be natural, immediate, universal unities,” which then makes it possible “to describe other unities, but this time by means of a group of controlled decisions” (Foucault [1972] 2010, 29). These new discursive groups reveal an underlying dynamic that is often difficult to see when the dominant narratives are simply accepted, but they might be just as powerful as the dominant, or more visible, groupings. The above quote from Blavatsky is a good example of this because it connects kabbalah, mysticism, science, and physics in a way that runs against the dominant understanding of these concepts in the master narratives about what Western modernity and secularism is all about.

As can be seen from this example, scholars of esoteric discourses critically assess the dominant narratives about what it means to be European, Western, or modern. They use the historical material and suggest new groupings of ideas that are just as operative in cultural dynamics as those in the more dominant narratives, especially ones that have often remained invisible or tacit. This project, therefore, follows Foucault’s description:

I shall take as my starting-point whatever unities are already given (such as psychopathology, medicine, or political economy); but I shall make use of them just long enough to ask myself what unities they form; by what right they can claim a field that specifies them in space and a continuity that individualizes them in time; according to what laws they are formed; against the background of which discursive events they stand out; and whether they are not, in their accepted and quasi-institutional individuality, ultimately the surface effect of more firmly grounded unities. (Foucault [1972] 2010, 26)

These groupings are then subjected to interrogation, and new groupings can be suggested and tested. This process ultimately “makes it possible to construct a theory of them” (Foucault [1972] 2010, 26).

Scholars can call a grouping of discourses “esotericism” even if the sources do not use that term. They can therefore also choose any term that they may find appropriate to label this specific group of ideas, an option discussed later. The grouping of discourse strands could include, for instance, discourses of perfect knowledge, paganism, Platonism, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, magic, occultism, or secrecy. Of course, scholars, on the basis of historical evidence, need to explain why certain discourse strands and not others are included.

Using the Three Approaches to Esoteric Discourse. All three approaches have advantages and disadvantages, but they can all provide a rigorous analytical framework for the study of esotericism. In a discursive framework, no one narrative or grouping Represents the historical truth. Just like the narratives that are criticized, this reconstruction of the genealogy of knowledge is simply an attempt to make sense of the world. However, this approach is much more self-reflective than other narratives and takes seriously the complexities and conflicting dynamics that shape contemporary knowledge and cultural identities.

DISPUTE 2: CAREER ISSUES

There are also controversies about the strategic and political positioning of research and teaching. Students of esotericism often question whether the study of esotericism actually hinders their academic career because of the widespread prejudices concerning its content.

“IT’S ALL ABOUT TENURE!”

These concerns are real. In his keynote lecture at the 2013 Annual Meeting of the Dutch Association for the Study of Religion (NGG) in Leiden, the historian Ronald Hutton (1953–) talked about the many negative experiences the study of paganism meant for his career and academic reputation (Hutton 2013). Hutton strongly advised students to choose other fields of research if they wanted an academic career, or at least find new labels for what they were studying to avoid misunderstandings.

In a similar vein, a well-established scholar once confided over beer: “Well, you know, it’s all about tenure.” Studying topics such as esotericism or astrology (about which the negative stereotypes are perhaps even more pronounced than about esotericism; see von Stuckrad 2015) definitely makes an academic career more difficult.

One solution is to broaden one’s studies. When scholars leave the niche of esotericism, they greatly improve their chance of gaining permanent positions in higher education. The careers of students in esotericism have benefited from interdisciplinary as well as specialized training. Training within such fields as cultural studies and the study of religion opens opportunities for excellent scholars. These scholars typically do not work in esotericism programs but in programs that integrate their academic work into larger frameworks, such as early Christianity, Renaissance art and culture, or religion and science.

PROBLEMS OF SELF-MARGINALIZATION

Another solution is to stop marginalizing the field. Some of the problems of scholars in esotericism are homegrown (see also Davidsen 2012). Although there certainly is a strong

bias against many themes that esotericism research covers, these biases are repeatedly affirmed when scholars present esotericism as concerned with the fringes or margins of mainstream culture, as a counterculture, as rejected or persecuted knowledge, or even as the “wastebasket of Western history” (Hanegraaff 2012). These labels may reflect the dissident identities of practitioners and scholars of esotericism, but they also reinforce the biases that these same scholars lament. What’s more, labels such as *wastebasket* and *oppressed religion* do not help to positively define esotericism or clearly demarcate the field.

As long as scholars buy into the persecution and rejection narrative, they will be unable to see the enormous impact that esoteric discourse has exerted on mainstream culture throughout the centuries. Gnostic and Manichaean theologies were the main competitors for Catholicism in late antiquity. Early Islamic theories of rays and magic (as already explained) influenced mainstream science through the centuries, from medieval theories of art to theories of nature and “ether” in the nineteenth century. The search for the “language of the angels” was an important reason for the establishment of Hebraic studies and other philologies at European universities in the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, almost half of the Jewish community in Europe believed in the kabbalah. The search for “higher knowledge” was a battle cry of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Finally, many beliefs that scholars consider “rejected” are actually mainstream ideas in Europe today (such as astrology, reincarnation, guardian angels, clairvoyance, interspecies communication).

LEAVING THE NICHE

Isn’t it time to leave the cozy niche and self-inflicted marginalization of esotericism research? Instead, work in this field can be said to reflect an interest in cultural diversity and the plurality of knowledge systems in Europe and North America, in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and the production of what counts as valid knowledge. Various religious systems of knowledge interact with scientific, philosophical, philological, experiential, and other systems of knowledge in a complex way, and it is this interaction that has shaped European culture from ancient times through today. Some of these knowledge systems—for instance, astrology, alchemy, magic, kabbalah, holistic philosophies of nature, and metaphysical ideas and experiences—have been controversial. The response oscillates between rejection and fascination, often simultaneously in different locations within European and North American societies. This research is an attempt to better understand how these competing systems of knowledge work and to describe their changing places in cultural discourse.

Such a description of the field does not require using the term *esotericism*. In fact, many people understand much better what is at stake if scholars avoid the term, because then they do not become caught up with their own ideas about what esotericism is. What’s more, people are fascinated by this account of European cultural dynamics and feel invited to think about it from their own background.

THE END OF A DISCIPLINE?

Does this mean that the study of esotericism should be dismantled? The answer is both yes and no. Scholars should stop thinking of esotericism as a field with a clear definition and demarcation or as a tradition that can be retrieved from history. They should also stop fashioning themselves as dissident scholars who represent the oppressed and the marginalized. However, they should not stop researching the themes that constitute this area of research. There is a need for experts in the academic study of gnosticism, Hermeticism, alternative Christianities, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, magic, occultism, theosophy, astrology, alchemy,

paganism, nature-based spiritualities, sufism, new age culture, and American metaphysical religion. These themes do not constitute a coherent field of research, but they are related to knowledge systems that have shaped European and North American cultural identities. It is in relation to these cultural identities that they receive their meaning.

Perhaps *Western esotericism* should be seen as a heuristic concept, a helpful term in establishing a critical perspective on the narratives of European identity. In the course of time, though, the term has become more and more problematic, to the point of being counterproductive and restabilizing the very narrative it has claimed to overcome. It is time to leave the term behind and to apply a vocabulary that is more apt to analyze the place of the phenomena under study in their various cultural settings.

Summary

Research into esotericism has struggled with conceptual challenges since its inception as an academic field in the second half of the twentieth century. The lack of a common definition, an agreed-upon demarcation of the field, and the most suitable approach to interpret its data have become a severe problem for the acceptance of esotericism research in broader academic contexts. Major disputes about the temporal and spatial borders of what some scholars call Western esotericism are still unresolved, and the study of esotericism has, as yet, given only cursory notice to theoretical debates that have been going on for some time in cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and critical historiography.

On a deeper level of analysis, the common presentation of esotericism as being linked to rejected, oppressed, fringe, or countercultural knowledge—although meant as a critique of standard narratives about European culture—has repeatedly reinforced the narratives that this critique addresses and unintentionally confirms the fringe status of esotericism research. This is a conceptual and theoretical difficulty, but it also presents a huge problem for scholars who want to build an academic career on the study of esotericism.

As a solution to these challenges it seems appropriate to integrate the study of esoteric currents and phenomena into a larger analytical framework that conceptualizes work on European and North American identity as an ongoing process since ancient times. Many themes studied under the rubric of esotericism are part of an influential history of Europe's fascination with religious and philosophical alternatives to Christianity that have been transmitted in the sciences but also in philology, art, and academic discourse more generally. If the label *esotericism* fails to establish this research in a broader social and academic setting, a new vocabulary will be needed that captures the importance of studying the pluralistic dimensions of European and North American culture.

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