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Agency, Global Definitions, and the Case of Islamic Esotericism

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The target article focuses on the way "esotericism" has been defined exclusively within the study of Western esotericism.[1] Their conclusions rest on a perceived definitional "rigidity" in previous approaches, in the sense of having 'an emphasis on necessary and sufficient criteria (with a correlated susceptibility to counterexamples; and an assessment as true or false)'.[2] To demonstrate this rigidity, the authors respond, for the most part, to the works of Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff, Kocku von Stuckrad, Helmut Zander and other major scholars from the field of Western esotericism. By contrast, they recommend fluid definitions that are 'pliant (in the sense that a given definition can be applied with wiggle-room, while remaining useful in a given context), complementary (in the sense that more than one definition can be productive in a given case)'.[3] "Fluidity" here means shifting the defining of things from a realist ontology (and thus "metaphysics" in the authors' view) to semantics.[4]

Although they briefly reference an 'emerging global/entangled histories approach', it is barely engaged in the construction of their definitional properties and criteria, merely noting in a footnote (5) that 'the concept of western (and hence non-western) is overly vague and inherently problematic. But it serves its limited argumentative purpose well enough in the present context.' This limited engagement with global approaches is likely due to the authors' view of them as informed by a kind of "realism" at 'the unyielding sidewalls of essentialism and radical constructionism, when right in front of us is an unlocked antirealist door',[5] which does not need empirical reference. In my

1 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 152.
2 Ibid., 158.
3 Ibid., 158.
4 Ibid., 180.
5 Ibid., 171.

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response, from those sturdy walls, I will draw attention to the ways global approaches and postcolonial approaches achieve elasticity in the definition of esotericism,[6] with a focus on the role of agency and the use of prototypes in these approaches, demonstrating this in the case of Islamic esotericism or *al-bāṭiniyya*.

1 Agency

Although the authors agree that it is problematic to apply European definitions to non-European contexts, non-European agency in the definition is sidelined due to the "anti-realism" of their approach.[7] The limitations of this approach are alluded to, again in a footnote: 'Our definition is not intended to encompass Indigenous traditions, though it could include modern, postcolonial and decolonial developments, variants and off-shoots of these'.[8] This disconcertingly implies that a) fluidity privileges modernity, and b) indigeneity and modernity are incompatible,[9] while sidelining the role of agency central to global and postcolonial approaches. They seem to subsume the relevance of such approaches under the metacriterion of '*high tension discursive transfer*' which is 'correlated with normative devaluation, as a result of effects associated with disputes over and impositions of power'[10] which somehow, according to their methodology, still lies beyond empirical reference.[11] Thus, any critical analysis can only happen on the level of semantics. Even on this level, the authors miss the opportunity to refer to the recent conversation on 'postcolonial semantics' that 'engages critically with the semantic conceptualizations born out of colonial-era linguistic worldviews, especially in the form of a critique of the terminological and conceptual biases that have entered into the frameworks of modern cognitive and social sciences, including Eurocentric and Anglocentric concepts and terminologies that characterize the vocabulary and priorities of modern linguistics'.[12]

6 No equivalence is intended here between global and postcolonial approaches. They have developed independently; however, their intersection is an important recent development, see Krishnaswamy, 'Postcolonial and Globalization Studies', 5.

7 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 180, 193.

8 Ibid., 193 n. 123.

9 Harney and Philips (eds.), *Mapping Modernisms*; Scully, 'Indigeneity, Agency and Modernity'.

10 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 183 (Table 3).

11 Ibid., 180.

12 Levisen, 'Postcolonial Semantics', 67.

2 Prototypes

The authors hold that realist approaches use prototypes problematically 'as perfectly exemplifying the criterion', whereas their polythetic semantic approach is 'consistent with treating prototypes as illustrative but not perfect examples'.[13] This binary oversimplifies the use of the prototype in various disciplines and the critical approaches that have emphasized the need to destabilise the prototype in order to a) demonstrate the agency of overlooked actors in its construction, and b) de-essentialise it and reassess its relevance.

The authors' understanding of the prototype effectively takes "Western esotericism" as normative despite the rigidity of the definitions generated by the study. However, definitions from global and postcolonial approaches question universalism and essentialism by looking at esotericism as a continuously reshaped and contested discursive construct. For example, referring to the sociologist Ioachim Matthes and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, Michael Bergunder has shown that "Western esotericism" rests on a European prototype, which demands that scholars historicize this general term (esotericism) while being mindful of the "cultural interpretation" behind it. Global approaches thus elasticize the point of comparison by studying entangled actors in various zones of the world,[14] while postcolonial approaches address the asymmetrical relations, political, economic, social, etc. between those actors.[15]

3 *Al-Bāṭinīyya*

I have shown in two articles that *al-bāṭinīyya* can be perceived as an Islamic prototype of esotericism. It is historically deeper than "Western esotericism" which engaged with it via orientalist discourses interested in the esoteric-exoteric dichotomy in Islamic as well as Asian contexts.[16] Rather than saying that 'the *concept* [my italics] of Islamic esotericism originated among the Traditionslists', as the authors state,[17] I argue that *al-bāṭinīyya* is a construct with a historical genealogy and negotiations that existed since the ninth century.[18] In the West, the *term* "ésotérisme islamique"—and its English translation—

13 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 155 (Table 1).
14 Maltese and Strube, 'Global Religious History', 234.
15 Bergunder, 'Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity'.
16 Strube, 'The Emergence of "Esoteric" as a Comparative Category'.
17 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 160 n. 22.
18 Saif, 'What is Islamic Esotericism?', 22, 17.

emerged in the early twentieth century among the Traditionalists, as well as non-Traditionalists who had personal, intellectual, and esoteric links to them.[19]

The authors indicate that I focus on hiddenness in my definition of esotericism.[20] What I do is rather propose four principles—criteria—of Islamic esotericism on the basis of a historical-textual review, without ascribing coherence to "hiddenness" in the Islamic discourse beyond lexical origins that the construct transcends and complicates as it is negotiated and contested. These principles are an exegetical engagement (Qur'an), epistemological negotiations (intellectual engagement vs revelatory), salvation, and semantic exclusivity (not the same as "secret" or "hidden"). I have shown, however, that 'the fluctuation of the importance or urgency of discretion means that it cannot be deemed a defining trait of Islamic esotericism'.[21] The four principles I propose are, as a result, considered by the authors to be a '*narrow* characterization, given that the categories of exegesis, salvation and symbolism are *too broad* to intersect with prominent definitions of western esotericism'.[22] This demonstrates that extracting criteria and metacriteria from 'prominent definitions of western esotericism' is of limited value for transcending Eurocentrism and West-centrism.

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19 Ibid., 32.

20 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 45 n. 136. The authors claim that 'Saif translates *bāṭin* as "hidden", "the interior of things", "concealed and requiring interpretation", "interior", "veiled from the sight" and "the esoteric (esotericism)"'. I do not translate *bāṭin* as hidden, but I refer to Ibn Manẓūr's definition from *Lisān al-ʿarab* (The Language of the Arabs), completed in 1290, that *bāṭin* can signify the interior of things, Bāṭin and *Ẓāhir* are among the names of God, and each verse of the Qur'an is described as having a meaning that is *bāṭin* (concealed and requiring interpretation) and *ẓāhir* (manifest) (Saif, 'What is Islamic Esotericism?', 18). I translate *bāṭin* as esoteric.

21 Saif, 'What is Islamic Esotericism?', 17.

22 Engler and Gardiner, '(Re)defining *Esotericism*', 195.

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