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**Publication date**

2015

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Correspondences

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**Citation for published version (APA):**

Hanegraaff, W. J. (2015). The Globalization of Esotericism. *Correspondences*, 3(1), 55-91.  
<http://correspondencesjournal.com/volume-3/14303-2/>

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# The Globalization of Esotericism\*

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## Abstract

In recent discussions about the study of esotericism, the adjective “Western” has come under critical scrutiny. Shouldn’t “esotericism” be understood as a global rather than just a Western field of research? Doesn’t the very concept of a “Western esotericism” logically imply that there must be an “Eastern esotericism” as well? If so, what would that be? And in what respects would this “esotericism” common to Eastern and Western cultures be different from non-esoteric cultural formations? Or is the terminology supposed to imply, to the contrary, that esotericism is something unique to Western culture, with no parallels elsewhere? But if so, what is it that makes it unique, and how are we supposed to define and demarcate “the West” from “the Rest”? Are we supposed to think in terms of a geographical space or of a cultural domain? In either case, doesn’t the very term “Western” imply an essentialist discourse with troubling political connotations and implications? The author of this article argues that these problems are best approached from a historical rather than a strictly theoretical perspective. Reviewing the most important stages in the conceptualization of “esotericism” as a distinct field of study since the early modern period, he argues that it has always been theorized as a global rather than just Western phenomenon. Nevertheless, he concludes, it is advisable to maintain the concept of “Western esotericism,” not for reasons of conceptual *theory* but for reasons of historical *method*.

## Keywords

esotericism; western esotericism; orientalism; globalization; rejected knowledge; paganism; occultism; Edward Burnett Tylor; Lucien Lévy-Bruhl; participation; Carl Gustav Jung; Antoine Faivre

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\* This article is based upon a keynote lecture given at the 5th biannual conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), Riga, 16 April 2015.

As noted by Egil Asprem in a recent contribution to *Correspondences*, a strong case can be made for “dismissing the categorisation of esotericism as intrinsically Western, on historical and terminological grounds.”<sup>1</sup> In the present article I intend to examine this claim in some detail, with reference to the main arguments that have been presented for such a position in the recent scholarly literature. Are we moving from the concept of “Western esotericism” to an understanding of esotericism as a global phenomenon?

### A Short History of the Adjective

The adjective “Western” in combination with “esotericism” seems a fairly recent innovation. It appeared clearly in Antoine Faivre’s foundational monograph *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental* (1986), and has become firmly established in the study of esotericism at least since 2001. In that year, the French journal *ARIES* (an acronym of the *Association pour la Recherche et l’Information sur l’Esotérisme*, founded in 1985 by Antoine Faivre together with Roland Edighoffer and Pierre Deghaye)<sup>2</sup> was re-launched as a new series by Brill Academic publishers, resulting in the first professional peer-reviewed journal in the field. While the original series was devoted to the study of “l’ésotérisme,” without adjective (although the journal was focused clearly on the occident), the new series was explicitly titled *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*. This terminological specification had much to do with a new research agenda that reflected the more general move in Religious Studies, since the 1980s, from a predominantly “religionist” paradigm towards perspectives marked by methodological agnosticism, empiricism, and critical historiography.<sup>3</sup> As the

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<sup>1</sup> Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 4 (and footnote 1 for references to the main contributions to the debate).

<sup>2</sup> The original ARIES series (1985–1999) is now available online: [www.esswe.org/journal](http://www.esswe.org/journal).

<sup>3</sup> On the notion of “religionism” and its historical backgrounds, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. 127, note 174, 295–314, 357–58. While religionism is mostly associated with Mircea Eliade and his “Chicago School,” that understanding is historically too narrow: its real origin lies in the famous Eranos meetings, 1933–1988. See Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Sheffield/Bristol: Equinox, 2013) and expanded German original: Hakl, *Eranos: Nabel der Welt, Glied der goldenen Kette. Die alternative Geistesgeschichte* (Gaggenau: Scientia Nova, 2015). For an early programmatic statement on empirical versus religionist and reductionist method in relation to esotericism, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism,” *Method & Theory in the Study of*

original *ARIES* series was created in the mid-1980s, when this development was just beginning to take off, it was still inspired by explicit spiritual and esoteric agendas. The editorial introduction to the first volume (1985) leaves no ambiguity about that point:

In his *Liber introductorius in Apocalypsin*, composed around 1190, Joachim of Fiore compares the quest for God and the Truth to navigation. Maritime itineraries are multiple, with everyone choosing his own way as the spirit of the wind blows; but this diversity does not need to be a bad thing, for all the mysteries are subject to the Truth, which is one. Thus all navigators, as little as they may know about consulting the stars, will finally arrive in the same haven and the same city. As for the trajectory traversed by their little boat: the sea (as in Ps. 77) will preserve no trace of it.

The metaphors that Joachim of Fiore applied to the understanding of Holy Scripture are relevant to all esoteric research. Those who are not satisfied by the rational explanations of the universe, who reject positivist reductionism and the blinders of scientism, those who are in search of the unknowable, who are attracted by the mysteries of God, Man, and Matter, who are searching for the Spirit in Creation, must also attempt this journey.

*Aries* is there to help them. Like the legendary Ram of the Golden Fleece, it will lead them to the most recent sources of esoteric thinking. The best academic specialists of the Western world have agreed to regularly keep the readers of the journal *Aries* informed about publications relevant to this domain. Their analyses and book reviews will be like so many boundary stones of Hermes, beacons along the roads that lead towards the light.<sup>4</sup>

Such metaphors – scholars engaged in multiple esoteric trajectories over one and the same ocean of Divine Truth that remains unaffected by what happens on its surface, and a journey towards one and the same spiritual haven of Light – are typical of religionism in its most explicit form and may help us understand why “esotericism” could not be understood as limited to “the West” alone. It had to be as universal as Truth itself. At this time it was still considered self-evident that students of esotericism were motivated by some personal spiritual quest.

By 2001, such crypto-theological perspectives were on their way out in the academic Study of Religion,<sup>5</sup> and *Aries* New Series reflected that change. The

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*Religion* 7, no. 2 (1995): 99–129.

<sup>4</sup> “Éditorial,” *ARIES* 1 (1985): 1.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Charlotte Allen, “Is Nothing Sacred? Casting out the Gods from Religious Studies,” *Lingua Franca* (November 1996): 30–40. As far as I know, the history of this theoretical and methodological transformation in the study of religion since the 1980s remains to be written.

adjective “Western” in its title was meant to suggest an emphasis on historical specificity rather than trans-historical universality: the journal was concerned with studying a series of neglected dimensions of Western culture, not with finding spiritual salvation or lifting the veil of Isis. Research of esotericism should be conducted according to normal scholarly methods as practiced in the academy at large, not on the basis of unverifiable *a priori* beliefs or spiritual commitments – no matter how commendable or inspiring these might be in themselves. This development was not just imposed upon “religionists” by their critics, as sometimes assumed by those who regret it; rather, it was part of a process of theoretical and methodological self-reflection among scholars of religion during the period under discussion. Notably, Antoine Faivre himself changed his mind during the 1990s and became a strong supporter and advocate of historical/empirical approaches.<sup>6</sup>

The adjective “Western” was further consolidated around 2005. At that time, the main scholarly organization in the field was the *Association for the Study of Esotericism* (ASE), founded at Michigan State University in 2002, which organized its biannual conferences in the United States.<sup>7</sup> As European scholars began to feel the need for a complementary organization based on their side of the Atlantic, as well as a stronger demarcation from religionist perspectives,<sup>8</sup> in January 2005 they decided to establish the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism* (ESSWE). The ESSWE was legally incorporated on April 21, 2005, and has been organizing biannual conferences in Europe since 2007, alternating with those organized by the ASE.<sup>9</sup> The creation of the ESSWE happened to coincide with the publication of the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* in the same year.<sup>10</sup> As the first comprehensive scholarly reference work devoted to the field as a whole, it played an important role in defining its nature and boundaries at that time. As one can see, the adjective had been adopted as a standard part of the terminology.

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<sup>6</sup> On Faivre’s development from religionism to empiricism, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 334–55.

<sup>7</sup> “About the Association for the Study of Esotericism,” [www.aseweb.org](http://www.aseweb.org).

<sup>8</sup> The ASE and the ESSWE share a common emphasis on historical research, but whereas the ESSWE discourages religionism, the ASE discourages reductionism. Unfortunately, the latter position seems to reflect a misunderstanding of the technical meaning of “reductionism,” described on the ASE’s website as “the denigration rather than the study of esoteric traditions or figures” ([www.esoteric.msu.edu/main.html](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/main.html)).

<sup>9</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Story of ESSWE,” *ESSWE Newsletter* 1 (2006): 2–4. So far, conferences have been organized in Göttingen (2007), Strasbourg (2009), Szeged (2011), Gothenburg (2013), and Riga (2015). The next conference is due to take place in Erfurt (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005).

## Contesting the Adjective

However, the focus and scope of the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* has been questioned by a number of critics and reviewers, and doubts have been raised about the usefulness or legitimacy of the adjective “Western.” In an important recent discussion, Kennet Granholm concludes that “we should forgo the use of it”;<sup>11</sup> and Egil Asprem asks “[w]hy can we not have a comparative study of esotericism on a truly global rather than a narrowly conceived ‘Western’ scale?”<sup>12</sup> If these critiques would carry the day, the ESSWE would presumably have to be renamed ESSE.

Let us have a quick look at the main arguments that have been adduced. First of all, the scope of “the West” as such has been criticized for being too narrow. With reference to the Brill *Dictionary*, some scholars have argued that Jewish and Islamic esotericism should be given the same amount of attention as Hellenistic, Christian, and post-Christian modern currents.<sup>13</sup> This is an important argument that deserves serious attention, although it must be said that implementing a “comparative esotericism of the religions of the book” is more difficult in practice than calling for it in theory.<sup>14</sup> Others have noted a predominant focus on English, German, French, Italian, and North-American culture at the expense of large European regions such as Scandinavia,<sup>15</sup> and the

<sup>11</sup> Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the *Western* in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 5.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 49. Surprisingly, von Stuckrad’s own introductory textbook is vulnerable to the same critique, since it devotes no more than three pages to Islam (Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* [London/Oakville: Equinox, 2005]; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism,” *Religion* 43:2 (2013), 182). Note that, in spite of his focus on “European History of Religion,” von Stuckrad seems to adhere to a notion of global esotericism of some kind: “I do not doubt that large parts of what I understand by esotericism can also be found in other cultures, and that a transcultural and comparative approach can be most valuable for our understanding of esotericism” (*Western Esotericism*, xi–xii).

<sup>14</sup> See discussion in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 14–17. For an important early contribution, see Faivre, “La question d’un ésotérisme comparé des religions du livre,” in “Henry Corbin et le comparatisme spirituel” (Colloque tenu à Paris les 5 et 6 juin 1999), *Cahiers du Groupe d’Études Spirituelles Comparées* 8 (2000): 89–120; and cf. Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method,” 121–24.

<sup>15</sup> Henrik Bogdan and Olav Hammer, introduction to *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Olav Hammer (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016).

same argument could (and should) be made for all the former Soviet countries as well as for such countries as Greece, Spain, and Portugal. Yet others have noted a neglect of contemporary esotericism as a dimension of global popular culture online and offline.<sup>16</sup> These are all legitimate concerns, even necessary ones, and have led to the emergence of several ESSWE networks focused precisely on these formerly neglected domains: notably the Scandinavian Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism (SNASWE), the Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism (CEENASWE), and the Contemporary Esotericism Research Network (ContERN), next to the independent Russian Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism (ASEM).<sup>17</sup>

But the scope of inquiry could and should be expanded further. Countries such as Israel (represented in the ESSWE context by the Israeli Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism, INASWE), Australia, or New Zealand are usually perceived as “Western” from a *cultural* point of view in spite of their *geographical* location in the Middle East and Southward of East-Asia.<sup>18</sup> Hence, if we speak of Western esotericism, we need to make up our minds. Do we mean a geographical space? (if so, where do we draw its boundaries, and why?) Or do we mean a cultural domain? (if so, how do we define it, and why?) There are no easy answers to these questions, not least because they carry highly sensitive political implications: you cannot think about the nature of “the West” for very long – in fact, you probably cannot think about it *at all* – without coming face to face with the painful but unavoidable legacy of Western imperialism, colonialism, orientalism, racism, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, if all these previous questions and inquiries are still concerned with where we draw the internal boundaries of “the West,” then what about “the Rest” – that is to say: everything that is clearly located outside of those

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<sup>16</sup> Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, eds., *Contemporary Esotericism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> See [www.esswe.org/Networks](http://www.esswe.org/Networks).

<sup>18</sup> A classic argument for Western civilization as a cultural rather than a geographical entity is Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* (1993): 22–49. For its relevance in the present context, cf. the brief discussion in Granholm, “Locating the West,” 21.

<sup>19</sup> With regard to the concept of “religion,” among many other relevant titles, see for instance Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions; or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); and David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville/London: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

boundaries both culturally *and* geographically? Once we have decided to include Islamic esotericism in Europe as a matter of principle, it becomes hard to see why esoteric currents in the Middle East and various other predominantly Islamic regions should not join the party as well. Moreover, it has recently been suggested that what we call “Western” esotericism has such close equivalences in Asian cultures such as India or China that it should make sense to speak of an “Indian,” a “Chinese,” or indeed a far-Eastern “esotericism.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, scholars of African American religions have (correctly) noted a serious neglect of “black esotericism” in current scholarship,<sup>21</sup> and this has recently led to a program called “*Africana* Esoteric Studies” focused on what they describe as “esoteric” lore and practices in Africa and the African diaspora.<sup>22</sup> Similar initiatives focused on esotericism in Middle and Latin America are currently being implemented as well.<sup>23</sup> To my knowledge (and profound regret), we do

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<sup>20</sup> This is the drift of e.g. Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), and Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, introduction to *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, 1–15. I have rather serious reservations about the definitions of “esotericism” and “occultism” on which their arguments are based; but for my present purposes, the fact *that* such arguments are being made by important scholars in the field is more important than the question of whether they are ultimately convincing.

<sup>21</sup> My own statement that “participants in the ‘cultic milieu’ of post-war esotericism have always been, and still remain, overwhelmingly white” (*Western Esotericism*, 131) stands to be corrected in the light of several contributions to Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory and Hugh R. Page, Jr., eds., *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: “There is a Mystery”*... (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), which demonstrate the esoteric dimension in e.g. the Five Percenters (Biko Mandela Grey, “Show and Prove: Five Percenters and the Study of African American Esotericism,” in *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*, 177–97), Nation of Islam (Stephen C. Finley, “Mathematical Theology: Numerology in the Religious Thought of Tynnetta Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan,” in *ibid.*, 123–37; Justine M. Bakker, “On the Knowledge of Self and Others: Secrecy, Concealment and Revelation in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam (1934–1975),” in *ibid.*, 138–51), Sun Ra (Marques Redd, “Astro-Black Mythology: The Poetry of Sun Ra,” in *ibid.*, 227–45.), or Ishmael Reed (Marques Redd, “Those Mysteries, Our Mysteries: Ishmael Reed and the Construction of a Black Esoteric Tradition,” in *ibid.*, 277–94).

<sup>22</sup> Finley, Simon Guillory & Page, *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*. On a theoretical and definitional level I find this volume’s understanding of “esotericism” extremely problematic (for instance, in a section about “Reinscribing the Boundaries of Western Esotericism” [Stephen C. Finley, Margarita S. Guillory and Hugh R. Page, “The Continuing Quest to Map Secrecy, Concealment, and Revelatory Experiences in *Africana* Esoteric Discourse,” in *ibid.*, 349–52], the authors ignore twenty years of theoretical debate); but again, the important point is *that* such arguments are presently being made.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Jean Pablo Bubello, *Historia del esoterismo en la Argentina: Prácticas, representaciones y*



not yet have a study of Western esotericism on the North Pole region and Antarctica, but surely that is only a matter of time!

### Cycling from Western to Global and Back

What should we think of this trend towards a globalization of the notion of esotericism? Do we want to go along with the suggestion that “esotericism” could be seen as a *global* phenomenon? Or are there reasons to insist that it is something specific to Western culture alone? In my opinion, *both* options are problematic in the extreme. Consider the following string of questions.

If we see esotericism as something global, then does this mean that “it” is universal and remains always the same regardless of context? → Or do we assume, rather, that “it” manifests differently in different cultural environments? → If we assume the latter, then by what criteria do we want to distinguish those supposedly universal features of “esotericism” from its local or culture-specific manifestations? → In either case, does it really make sense to distinguish between an “Eastern” and a “Western” variant of this one single thing called “esotericism” (whatever it might be)? → If we feel that it does make sense to make such a distinction, then where do we draw the boundary, and why? → But then again, why insist on “East” versus “West”? Why not differentiate between “Northern” and “Southern” forms instead, or split the whole thing up into more specific regional variants? → On the other hand, if we look at esotericism as something specifically “Western,” then what is it that makes it so unique and different from all the rest? And where or how then do we draw the boundaries of its “Western” identity? → Isn’t it true that the very adjective “Western” implies logically that there must be an “Eastern” esotericism as well?<sup>24</sup> → Do we understand it as “Western” in a geographical or in a cultural sense? → What happens if “Western” esoteric ideas or practices travel to non-Western cultures, for instance to India? Do we assume that they will behave like Western “tourists” there, so to speak? → Or will they come to stay, and eventually merge with Indian culture to such an extent that the result is something new: a cross-cultural mutation of

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*persecuciones de curanderos, espiritistas, astrólogos y otros esoteristas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2010); and the Center for the Study of Western Esotericism of the Union of South American Nations (CEEU-UNASUR; see information on [www.esswe.org](http://www.esswe.org), under “Affiliated Networks”).

<sup>24</sup> Marco Pasi, “The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects,” in *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years’ Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 153.

Western esotericism that can no longer be called just “Western” anymore but is now “Eastern” as well? → Or should it be seen, rather, as an “Eastern” development inspired by Western influence? → Do such distinctions make any sense at all, if we wish to understand such new phenomena? → Or do they merely create *mis*understandings based on essentialist notions of “East versus West”: a legacy of Western domination in the colonial era based on Orientalist stereotypes grounded in ideologies of Western superiority? → If so, are we not obliged to get rid of the very notion of “Western” esotericism and start speaking of a global esotericism instead?

As one can see, this series of questions finally leads us full circle. All of them are perfectly legitimate, but we could continue the inquiry forever, without ever resolving the problem or getting closer to a final conclusion. It is not hard to see that the two options (esotericism as something “global”; esotericism as something “Western”) are *both* very hard to maintain in a consistent manner, once we start questioning the assumptions on which they are based and the implications that follow from them. If so, it would seem that we are stuck. How do we escape from this circle?

### Historicizing the Problem

In my experience, what keeps us from resolving a theoretical dilemma is usually not so much the dilemma itself but the fact that we keep looking at it from an exclusively theoretical angle. The best recipe then consists of *historicizing* the problem, by asking ourselves who were the first to encounter it, and why. This means that we move our dilemma out of the timeless mental realm of theoretical abstractions and into our concrete life-world of embodied human beings operating in time and space.<sup>25</sup> The world of theory is a logical world, a world of “either/or,” whereas the world in which all of us are living is an empirical world, a world of “both/and.” In the messy reality where we actually find ourselves, we do not encounter theories. All we encounter is *people* very much like ourselves: human beings of flesh and blood who have been struggling with certain theoretical problems, sometimes for highly personal

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<sup>25</sup> See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 366 (where I suggest that historiography should ultimately trump theory/metatheory); and further discussion in Bernd-Christian Otto, “Discourse Theory trumps Discourse Theory: Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 231–40; and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 253–55, with notes 2 and 6.

and emotionally charged reasons, and who came up with proposals and ideas that (if truth be told) are seldom wholly consistent from a theoretical point of view but have sometimes proven so powerful that they keep deeply influencing our own. In some cases, our predecessors have succeeded in creating the very discursive framework, paradigm, or grand narrative within which we ourselves are still moving today – often without realizing it. As a result, as scholars we often end up playing our parts in *someone else's* story, on their conditions, and within the storylines that they have set up for us. The task then is to take a step backward, try to become aware of those stories, and see whether we might be able to begin writing a different and perhaps a better one.

### A Global Dustbin of Rejected Knowledge

At what point in history, then, do we first encounter the idea of “esotericism” as a Western or a more-than-Western and possibly global phenomenon? In my recent work, I have tried to trace the genealogy of *Western* esotericism, and reached the conclusion that this notion is grounded (perhaps surprisingly) in the virulent polemics of early modern Protestant thinkers around what many of them saw as a continuous tradition of pagan heresy that had begun in very ancient times and continued until the present.<sup>26</sup> These Protestant polemics were adopted by Enlightenment thinkers, who used them for their own ends to present their own worldview as “rational” and “scientific” by contrasting it with what they perceived as the perennial temptation of “superstition” and “the irrational.”<sup>27</sup> This idea of a sharp dualism between “science and superstition,” or “reason and unreason,” is essential to our concerns. We are often told that it goes back all the way to the Greeks, but I believe this to be a mistake. Of course, there is no doubt that in antiquity we find our share of rationalists who sharply critiqued or ridiculed a variety of popular or traditional practices and beliefs; but we do not yet find the dramatic notion of two monolithic “worlds” or mentalities, one defined by the light of reason and one defined by its dark opposite that is in need of illumination. *That* is a modern idea. In fact, I would go so far as to call it the very idea *of* modernity.

In any case, it is an idea with a history, a genealogy. It could not have emerged without a long and complicated previous history of Christian polemics against the alleged dangers of “paganism.” A classic and obvious reference is St Augustine, who imagined the world of Christianity as the City

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<sup>26</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 77–152.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–256.

of God opposed to the dark city of pagan error.<sup>28</sup> Such models of light versus darkness speak to the imagination and easily lend themselves to powerful and dramatic narratives of battle and conquest. As a result, imaginary scenarios of a momentous struggle between the forces of light (the light of the gospel, the light of reason) and the forces of darkness (demon-inspired cults, savagery, ignorance, superstition) have played a major role in the history of globalization, beginning with the discovery of the Americas and the Far East, and culminating in the era of imperialism and colonialism.

When explorers and missionaries arrived in Mexico, Peru, India, the various regions of Africa, and so on, they brought their Western models of “paganism” and “idolatry” with them.<sup>29</sup> When Westerners had to try and make sense of native beliefs and practices, they naturally did so by comparing them to *prototypes* that they knew from their own culture and history. As a result, the various religions of colonized peoples were perceived as similar to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, ancient Egyptian religion, and so on.<sup>30</sup> Some degree of positive appreciation for non-Western beliefs and practices was possible in so far as they were somewhat reminiscent of monotheist religion; for instance, the Renaissance model of a *prisca theologia*, based upon a positive idea of “pagan wisdom,” could be used as an interpretative grid or “intellectual filter,”<sup>31</sup> as when Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl described the ruler Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472) as “a sage even wiser than the divine Plato, who alone has managed to raise himself up to the knowledge of a single ‘creator of visible and invisible things’.”<sup>32</sup> But no such appreciation was possible or even imaginable if pagan beliefs or practices were seen as instances of pagan *idolatry*. The worship of divinities embodied in material objects or images was seen as the unforgivable sin from a monotheist perspective: this was the very “heart of darkness” that defined the essence of the false religion of heathens or pagans.<sup>33</sup> This

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<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed./trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> For a useful introduction to the discourse on “idolatry” in early modern Europe and its relevance to missionary and colonial discourse, see Carina L. Johnson, “Idoltrous Cultures and the Practice of Religion,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 4 (2006): 597–621.

<sup>30</sup> For Mexico and Peru, see Carmen Bernand and Serge Gruzinski, *De l'idolâtrie: Une archéologie des sciences religieuses* (Paris: Seuil, 1988); and cf. my blogpost “Exterminate all the Idols,” [www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.nl](http://www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.nl). For Southern Africa, see Chidester, *Savage Systems*.

<sup>31</sup> Ildikó Sz. Kristóf, “The Uses of Demonology: European Missionaries and Native Americans in the American Southwest (17–18th Centuries),” in *Centers and Peripheries in European Renaissance Culture: Essays by East-Central European Fellow*, eds. György E. Szönyi and Casaba Maczelka (JATE Press: Szeged, 2012), 167.

<sup>32</sup> Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras históricas*, vol. I, 405; see Bernand and Gruzinski, *De l'idolâtrie*, 136.

<sup>33</sup> For the concept of idolatry in its original Jewish context, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1992). For very striking

perennial error of pagan idolatry is precisely what the missionaries and colonizers believed they encountered all over the world.

I would suggest that these early forms of “comparative religion” are at the heart of our problem of Western versus global esotericism. In describing *Western* esotericism as “rejected knowledge,” my argument is that Enlightenment thinkers began to imagine a kind of cultural “waste basket” or reservoir of practices and beliefs that used to be seen as pagan idolatry by previous generations and were now re-described as dangerous or ridiculous nonsense that deserved no recognition or respect. Its remains should be destroyed and its memories forgotten.<sup>34</sup> The crucial point for our concerns is that the entire traditional amalgam of “pagan superstition, irrational belief, and idolatrous practice” that had been known since Hellenistic antiquity now appeared to be a *worldwide* phenomenon: the explorers and missionaries discovered that it was not just Western but global. In traditional Christian terms, *all* the religions of the world turned out to be forms of “pagan superstition” inspired by the devil – or at the very least they were thoroughly infected by it. In more modern Enlightenment terms, it all amounted to so many forms of irrational magic and occult prejudice.

It is here, then, that we have our first instance of the globalization of “esotericism” – although that particular term was not yet used at the time,<sup>35</sup> and the valuation was still wholly negative.

instances of the diabolization of American Indians as pagan idolaters, as visualized in the literature read by Jesuit missionaries during the 17th and 18th centuries, see Ildikó Sz. Kristóf, “Missionaries, Monsters, and the Demon Show: Diabolized Representations of American Indians in Jesuit Libraries of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Upper Hungary,” in *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and “Enfreakment,”* eds. Anna Kérchy and Andreas Zittlau (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 38–73.

<sup>34</sup> A paradigmatic request for erasing the very memory of “superstitious folly” and destroying its archival remains is Christoph August Heumann, “Von denen Kennzeichen der falschen und unächtten Philosophie,” *Acta Philosophorum* 2 (1715): 209–11 (see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 132–33). On the language of “extermination” as applied to the “idolatrous” culture of native peoples, cf. Hanegraaff, “Exterminate all the Idols.”

<sup>35</sup> Contrary to Monica Neugebauer-Wölk and apparently many of her German colleagues (see Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, “Historische Esoterikforschung, oder: Der lange Weg der Esoterik zur Moderne,” in *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*, eds. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth and Markus Meumann (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2013, esp. 37), it seems to me that the historical genealogy of the term “esotericism” (resp. *Esoterik*, *l’ésotérisme*, etc.), while extremely interesting in itself, is *not* of any decisive importance regarding its validity as an *etic* scholarly concept. Much more important than the question of which particular term happened to be used (*emically*) at any time is the *imaginative formations* to which it was meant to refer (but which might well be referred to by various terms next to “esotericism”). For my understanding of “imaginative formations,” see Hanegraaff, “Reconstructing ‘Religion’ from the Bottom Up” (forthcoming).

## From Rejection to Fascination

This situation did not last. As noted by Gerd Baumann in a brilliant discussion of identity politics,<sup>36</sup> binary oppositions of “good” versus “bad” are always subject to reversal, and the result is a sophisticated dialectics of rejection and desire. The very alterity of the excluded “Other” can turn it into an object of attraction; and once it has been constructed as an “alternative option” in the collective imagination, people who do not like the dominant narrative can easily shift their allegiance to its suppressed counterpart. In this manner, what Enlightenment thinkers rejected as bad could be embraced as good by their opponents, who could use it to construct their own identity in conscious opposition against what they saw as empty rationalism or soulless science. This is exactly what happened: the entire reservoir of “rejected knowledge” became an object of intense fascination for Romantics and other critics of the Enlightenment during the 19th century, precisely *because* of its perceived alterity vis-à-vis socially dominant models of science and rationality.

This reservoir of “rejected knowledge,” whether valued positively or negatively, was (again) perceived as *not* just Western but global. As far as one could tell, it was everywhere and had always been there. The terminology was still very fluid, with many different words and concepts floating around, including “paganism,” “heathenism,” “idolatry,” “superstition,” “fetishism,” “magic,” “mysticism,” “occult science,” “occult philosophy,” “unreason,” or even simply “craziness” or “stupidity.” Some of these terms (such as “superstition”) were too inherently negative to be eligible for neutral let alone positive usage,<sup>37</sup> others (such as “fetishism”) were just a bit too specific to work as a general umbrella term. But a few of the common terms turned out to be both general enough *and* suitable as more or less neutral or even positive concepts. The chief examples were “magic,”<sup>38</sup> “occult science,” “occult philosophy”<sup>39</sup> and

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<sup>36</sup> Gerd Baumann, “Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach,” in *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*, eds. Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2004), 20; cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 374.

<sup>37</sup> For the genealogy of “superstition,” see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 156–64.

<sup>38</sup> For the genealogy and theoretical problems of “magic,” in relation to the study of Western esotericism, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 164–77; idem, “Magic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn A. Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). The definitive study on the category “magic” in the study of religion is now Bernd-Christian Otto, *Magie: Rezeptions- und diskursgeschichtliche Analysen von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 1–132.

<sup>39</sup> For the genealogy of “occult science(s)” and “occult philosophy,” see Wouter J. Hanegraaff,

(eventually, in a later period) “paganism.”<sup>40</sup> During the 19th century, these terms now entered into the common vocabulary of both scholars *and* a new class of enthusiasts and practitioners. Scholars were studying the “beliefs and practices of mankind, from primitive to civilized man,” usually in terms of an evolutionary narrative with magic at the bottom and science at the top. As for the new class of amateur scholars and practitioners: eventually, many of them began calling themselves “occultists,” and they were proud to speak of “magic” or “occult science” as a force for *progress*, superior not just to conventional Christian religion but also to positivist science.<sup>41</sup> About one thing, at least, they were all in agreement: “magic” or “the occult” could be encountered everywhere around the globe and had been around since time immemorial.

As recently emphasized by Kennet Granholm, a particularly important and fascinating dimension of the occultists’ perspective was their embrace of a “positive Orientalism.”<sup>42</sup> The Protestant polemics against “paganism,” picked up and continued by Enlightenment thinkers, had been directed against the dominant Renaissance model of a *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis* and its belief in a supreme ancient wisdom that had originated somewhere in the Orient and had been transmitted through the Platonic tradition. This perspective of “Platonic Orientalism,”<sup>43</sup> with its positive appreciation of Wisdom from the East, had been thoroughly discredited by Protestant and Enlightenment

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“The Notion of ‘Occult Sciences’ in the Wake of the Enlightenment,” in *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*, eds. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth and Markus Meumann (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 73–95 (based in large part upon Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 177–91).

<sup>40</sup> For the genealogy of “paganism,” from the perspective of its relevance to contemporary neo-pagan discourse, see the earlier chapters of Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>41</sup> For some of these scholars of the occult in “the age of the amateur,” see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, ch. 3. For the relation of occultism to science, see Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014); for its relation to Enlightenment agendas of social progress, see Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), and cf. Pasi, “Modernity of Occultism”; and for its previously ignored relation to Socialism, in the context of Romanticism and Neo-Catholicism, see Julian Strube, *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts: Die Genealogie der Schriften von Eliphas Lévi* (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Heidelberg, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Granholm, “Locating the West,” 22–24; cf. Christopher Partridge, “Lost Horizon: H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, eds. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 309–33.

<sup>43</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 12–17ff.

thinkers,<sup>44</sup> and its place taken by *negative* valuations of the Orient as a place of mystical decadence, luxurious superstitions, blind despotism, and social stagnation. It is this perspective, of course, that Edward Said had in mind in his famous critique of “Orientalist” discourse.<sup>45</sup> But Said ignored its positive counterpart, represented by Romantic and occultist thinkers and much more influential than has long been assumed.<sup>46</sup> These thinkers *kept* building upon the Renaissance models of Platonic Orientalism, while developing them into new directions informed by the masses of newly available information about Far Eastern cultures such as India or Tibet.

In short, occultism was seen as something global, and its spiritual center or origin was widely believed to be somewhere in the Far East.<sup>47</sup> How then do we get from here to our current notions of “Western esotericism”? Marco Pasi has convincingly argued that its origins are in the late 19th and early 20th century “Hermetic reaction” against the increasing emphasis among occultists on Eastern wisdom:

With the “Hermetic Reaction” that develops in occultism as a response to Blavatsky’s emphasis on the “Eastern” sources of esoteric wisdom, the idea of a specifically “Western” esoteric tradition takes shape. Jewish kabbalah plays a crucial role in this process. Whereas Mme. Blavatsky tended to devalue Jewish kabbalah by considering it an inferior form of older “Oriental” traditions . . . , later “Hermetic” occultists come to perceive it as one of the pillars of a distinctly “Western” esoteric tradition, together with phenomena such as Rosicrucianism, alchemy, and the tarot.<sup>48</sup>

Groups such as Anna Kingsford’s Hermetic Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, or Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophical Society, all insisted on

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., ch. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>46</sup> On the relation between Romanticism and occultism, illustrated by the central case of Eliphas Lévi, see Strube, *Sozialismus, Katholizismus und Okkultismus*.

<sup>47</sup> *Geographically*, occultists were looking towards the Far East, notably India and Tibet; but *historically*, Theosophists in the wake of Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* (1888) began looking further back than the roots of Oriental civilization, towards the sunken continents of Lemuria and Atlantis, believed to be the home of the third and fourth “root races” (Joscelyn Godwin, *Atlantis and the Cycles of Time: Prophecies, Traditions, and Occult Revelations* (Rochester/Toronto: Inner Traditions, 2011), 64–116).

<sup>48</sup> Marco Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, eds. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 162.



the *specificity* of Western spiritual traditions. Oriental mysticism was considered too alien to the mentality of Western peoples, who should better stick to their own venerable traditions, notably the Kabbalah and Hermetic Philosophy. This argument was *still* based on the notion of occultism as a global phenomenon, but it was supposed to have developed differently in Eastern and Western cultures: “the Western Mind” was believed to be inherently different from “the Oriental Mind.” Within such a framework, it was certainly possible to see Eastern and Western occultism as equal and mutually complementary counterparts, each with their own occult tradition. But in practice, since the discourse just happened to be dominated by European and American occultists in the colonial era, it often carried subtle or less subtle suggestions of Western superiority – even in the work of authors who honestly believed that they were doing the opposite.<sup>49</sup>

By the time we reach the 20th century, we therefore have a situation of intense and widespread curiosity about the entire global reservoir of beliefs and practices that the Enlightenment had tried to reject as irrational superstition. The terminology was still not fixed. “Esotericism” was just one of the many terms that were now floating around, next to a family of concepts with the word “occult” in it (occult science, occult philosophy, occultism, the occult). “Magic” remained a particularly popular umbrella term, although some occultists (e.g. A.E. Waite) now insisted on a superior “mystical” interpretation. Be that as it may, as far as I can see, *nobody* believed that the domain in question was exclusively Western.

## Two Ways of Thinking

This entire domain of thought and practice seemed to be grounded in very basic assumptions, mental practices, or “mentalities,” that were hard or impossible to reconcile with some of the most central tenets of Enlightenment rationalism and positivist science. This is, of course, why they were dumped into the dustbin of “rejected knowledge” in the first place. How could such evidently false beliefs have acquired such a hold over the human mind? Was

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<sup>49</sup> On Theosophical appropriations of Orientalist discourse, and the ironies involved in this phenomenon, see Partridge, “Lost Horizon,” and cf. idem, “Orientalism and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015). It would be interesting to compare the perspectives of Western Theosophists who travelled to India with those of Westerners already well integrated in Indian society and Indians who embraced Theosophy in the context of their agendas of emancipation and liberation from British colonial rule.

there perhaps something about them that rationalists and scientists failed to see? If so, what was it? Intellectual reflection about the nature of “rejected knowledge” worldwide (its deep structure, its underlying assumptions, its mental habits, and so on, plus of course the question of how it was related to science and rationality) led to the formulation of popular and extremely influential theories that, as I hope to show, are ultimately at the bottom of current debates about the nature of “esotericism.” We are dealing here with an enormously complicated and multifaceted discourse about *Das Andere der Vernunft*,<sup>50</sup> and in what follows I will concentrate on just a few central authors and lines of argument.<sup>51</sup>

One of the most influential voices in the debate was the founder of cultural anthropology Edward Burnett Tylor, who argued that “magic” or “occult science” (he did not differentiate between the two terms) differs from genuine science in being based upon an elementary error of logic, i.e. the false assumption that things or events that we connect in our minds must therefore be connected in the outside world:

The principal key to the understanding of Occult Science is to consider it as based on the Association of Ideas, a faculty which lies at the very foundation of human reason, but in no small degree of human unreason also. Man, as yet in a low intellectual condition, having come to associate in thought those things which he found by experience to be connected in fact, proceeded erroneously to invert this action, and to conclude that association in thought must involve similar connexion in reality. He thus attempted to discover, to foretell, and to cause events by means of processes which we can now see to have only an ideal significance. By a vast mass of evidence from savage, barbaric, and civilized life, magic arts which have resulted from thus *mistaking an ideal for a real connexion* may be clearly traced from the lower culture which they are of, to the higher culture which they are in.<sup>52</sup>

Based on this understanding of “magic” or “occult science,” it all came down to a simple question of education: if one just teaches people to make correct use of their rational faculties, they will cease to believe in magic. Essentially this is still the position of hardline skeptics and new atheists such as Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett today. But Tylor was a subtle thinker and eventually realized

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<sup>50</sup> Hartmut Böhme and Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983).

<sup>51</sup> A very important strand that will not be discussed here is based upon Max Weber’s thesis of “disenchantment.” See Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*.

<sup>52</sup> Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, vol 1, 1871 (London: John Murray, 1913), 115–16 (emphasis added).

that things were more complex. He tried to keep “magic” or “occult science” apart from the more respectable domain of “religion” (based on “animism,” defined as the belief in spiritual beings), but discovered to his chagrin that he was unable to do so: the categories just kept blending into one another, both empirically and theoretically.<sup>53</sup> At least as worrying was the fact that both magic and religion were deeply involved in yet another phenomenon that puzzled the rationalists: that of mythology. How could even such reasonable people as the ancient Greeks have believed in those wildly irrational stories about the gods? This issue was connected in Tylor’s mind with another universal phenomenon of “primitive culture” that he referred to as “the great doctrine of *analogy*.”<sup>54</sup> It referred to the tendency of human beings to engage in correlative thinking, so that they perceive reality in terms of non-causal correspondences instead of causal relations that can be empirically proven and logically understood. Analogical thinking was closely interwoven with mythology, and Tylor believed that both were now “dying” under the impact of science:

The myths shaped out of those endless analogies between man and nature which are the soul of all poetry, into those half-human stories still so full to us of un fading life and beauty, are the masterpieces of an art belonging rather to the past than to the present. The growth of myth has been checked by science, and is dying of weights and measurement, of proportions and specimens – it is not only dying, but half dead, and students are anatomising it. In this world one must do what one can, and if the moderns cannot feel myth as their forefathers did, at least they can analyse it. There is a kind of intellectual frontier within which he must be who will sympathise with myth, while he must be without who will investigate it, and it is our fortune that we live near this frontier-line, and can go in and out.<sup>55</sup>

One can see that Tylor felt somewhat conflicted about the phenomenon, and some part of him regretted the fact that myth, analogy, and even magic were things of the past. Be that as it may, this staunch rationalist and positivist spent his career trying to somehow make sense of all those “weird” beliefs and practices that the Enlightenment had been fighting as superstitious nonsense.

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<sup>53</sup> Detailed analysis in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Emergence of the Academic Science of Magic: The Occult Philosophy in Tylor and Frazer,” in *Religion in the Making: The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, eds. Arie L. Molendijk and Peter Pels (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1998), 254–65, with special reference to Tylor’s neglected article “Magic.” It should come as no surprise that precisely the category of “idolatry” was responsible for blurring the boundary between “magic” (occult science) and “religion” (animism).

<sup>54</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 296–97.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

Implicit in his work is the discovery that he was not just dealing with one thing, but with *many*: science and rationality did not just have a problem with “magic,” but also with “animism,” with “myth,” with “analogical” or correlative thinking and, as a result, with “symbols” (as opposed to discursive language and logic). With hindsight, we can see that all these categories had just one thing in common, namely the simple fact that none of them fit the requirements of Enlightenment reason and its brand-new ideal of a “scientific worldview.” We seem to be faced with a situation where one single warrior – the modern Scientist or Man of Reason – is fighting a multitude of “irrational” enemies.

There have been many attempts to reduce the contents of this global reservoir of “rejected knowledge” to essentially one single thing (or, to put it more bluntly, to define the essence of the irrational). Among the most important and influential examples is the French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.<sup>56</sup> His lasting contribution lies in a very simple idea that, however, seems to have been surprisingly hard to entertain for intellectuals at the time when he was writing: that there are two basic and irreducible “mentalities” or “ways of thinking” available to the human mind. The first one could be referred to as “instrumental causality” and works with demonstrable chains of cause-and-effect that can be precisely described and logically understood;<sup>57</sup> the other was referred to as “participation” and works according to different principles. These principles were not so easy to define and describe, however, precisely *because* they do not satisfy the requirements of logic and instrumental causality on which scholars just happen to rely in their normal discursive speech. For instance Stanley Tambiah makes a serious attempt to define “participation,” but with questionable success: it supposedly signifies “the association between persons and things ... to the point of identity and consubstantiality,” it is “indifferent to ‘secondary’ causes (or intervening mechanisms)” because “the connection between cause and effect is immediate and intermediate links are not recognized.”<sup>58</sup> In the end, such formulations do not tell us much more than that “participation” (like the equally incomprehensible doctrine

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<sup>56</sup> For my take on Lévy-Bruhl, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World,” *Religion* 33 (2003): 371–78. For a useful short overview of the “rationality debate” in relation to Lévy-Bruhl’s theory, see Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 345–56. For a critique, see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 124–25.

<sup>58</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86.

of “consubstantiality” basic to Trinitarian and Eucharistic theology) is *not* instrumental causality. What it *is* remains as mysterious as ever. Because participation was so clearly opposed to “modern” notions of instrumental causality, Lévy-Bruhl first assumed that it was typical only of “primitive” thought; but by the end of his life, he had concluded that this could not be correct. Both “mentalities,” he concluded, were universal to the human mind and could be found everywhere, not just among the “primitives” but in modern society as well.

Lévy-Bruhl was among the most important early influences on the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. Jung deserves special attention in the present context, because there is probably no other 20th century thinker whose work has been more important and influential with respect to the idea of a “Western” versus a “global” esotericism. Not only did he concentrate on many central aspects of what we now call Western esotericism,<sup>59</sup> but he tried to expand its horizon by exploring its parallels in Eastern cultures and other parts of the world. Jung’s pivotal study *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* (Transformations and Symbols of the Libido, 1911–12) was grounded in the concept of “two ways of thinking.”<sup>60</sup> This idea was crucially indebted to Lévy-Bruhl’s *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* published one year earlier, but also to a theory that had emerged in German Romantic Mesmerism with authors such as Justinus Kerner and Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert.<sup>61</sup> They pioneered the idea of two complementary types of consciousness associated with night and day, the heart and the brain, dream and reason, symbolism and discursive language, nature and society.<sup>62</sup> As far as Jung was concerned, Lévy Bruhl and the Romantic mesmerists were talking about one and the same thing.

Jung’s *Wandlungen* led to the break with Sigmund Freud, which became final in early January 1913;<sup>63</sup> and toward the end of that same year, Jung entered a

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<sup>59</sup> For Jung’s importance to the study of Western esotericism, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277–95. Although he did not yet use the term “esotericism,” its centrality to Jung’s work is evident from the sheer list of his research topics: the “occult phenomena” of somnambulism and spiritualist mediumship (in his dissertation), ancient gnosticism, Hellenistic mystery cults, alchemy, the various manifestations of what he called “synchronicity” (astrology, correspondences, natural magic), quantum mysticism, UFO phenomena, and the Aquarian Age.

<sup>60</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido: Beiträge zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Denkens*, 1911–12 (Leipzig/Vienna: Franz Deuticke, 1925), 7–35.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Sonu Shamdasani, *C.G. Jung: A Biography in Books* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 31–32, 53–55.

<sup>62</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 262–66.

<sup>63</sup> Deirdre Bair, *Jung: A Biography* (Boston/New York/London: Little, Brown and Company, 2003), 238.

deep mental and spiritual crisis. In an attempt at self-therapy, he began filling notebooks (the so-called *Black Books*) with accounts of the intense dreams, visions, and fantasies that began to overwhelm him, and these led eventually to a unique manuscript in calligraphic script on parchment that has become known as *Liber Novus* or *The Red Book*. It was kept under lock and key for many years but was finally published in 2009.<sup>64</sup> It shows Jung's existential struggle with the two radically opposed and mutually exclusive "ways of thinking," mentalities, or types of consciousness that Lévy-Bruhl had been talking about. Jung introduces them as the *Geist dieser Zeit* (Spirit of This Time), which uses logic and discursive language and believes in science, and its opponent, the *Geist der Tiefe* (Spirit of the Depth), which uses images and myths to speak about the deeper truths of the soul. It is perfectly clear that this *Geist der Tiefe* represented the suppressed voices of everything that had been dumped into the reservoir of "rejected knowledge" and was now widely seen as incompatible with science and reason: primitive magic, myth, paganism, the occult, symbolism, analogical thinking, and so on. In a real sense, *Liber Novus* documents the return of the repressed.

Throughout his *Red Book* we see Jung struggling with his fear of ridicule and public humiliation. Wasn't all this "irrational" stuff just the bottomless reservoir of human stupidity and silly superstitions? Wouldn't he himself, an internationally respected psychiatrist, be dismissed as a fool or an idiot for paying any serious attention to such topics? Or worse, wasn't this "Spirit of the Depth" really the spirit of unreason and madness? Wouldn't listening to it drive him literally insane?<sup>65</sup> In the end, he decided to accept the risk: rather than rejecting all these visions and fantasies as crazy nonsense, he would take them seriously and try to understand what they had to tell him. The entirety of his later oeuvre is based on that decision, to an extent that we can only begin to understand now that *The Red Book* has become available.

Jung eventually concluded that the various traditions of "rejected knowledge" could be studied and understood *historically*,<sup>66</sup> as a continuous stream that went back at least as far as the mystery religions of Hellenistic antiquity and the gnostic heresies of the first centuries. He thought they lived

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<sup>64</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, edited and introduced by Sonu Shamdasani (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> On the role of madness in Jung's *Red Book*, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Great War of the Soul: Divine and Human Madness in Carl Gustav Jung's *Liber Novus*," in *Krise und religiöser Wahn-Sinn*, ed. Sebastian Schüler (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 286–89.

on in the “Hermetic” science of alchemy through the Middle Ages, were picked up by thinkers such as Paracelsus during the Renaissance, and finally emerged once more in modern “occult” currents such as Mesmerism, Somnambulism, and Spiritualism. To make it all relevant again, and applicable to the needs of “modern man” after the Death of God – the struggle with Nietzsche’s legacy is absolutely central to Jung’s personal struggle documented in *The Red Book* – the tradition of rejected knowledge must now be transformed into a science. However, the scientific *Geist dieser Zeit* had almost killed the human soul by reducing it to reason alone. The new science based upon the *Geist der Tiefe* must therefore be a science of the soul: in other words – and quite literally – a scientific psychology.

If occultists in the final decades of the 19th century were the first to speak of a “Western occult tradition” (a “Hermetic” counterpart to Oriental Theosophy), then Jung seems to have been its second major pioneer. He disliked the Theosophists and tried to keep his distance from “occultists” in general, but his outline of a suppressed “Western” tradition was in fact quite similar to theirs, and it became enormously influential after World War II. But Jung’s ambitions went further than the West alone. The worldviews represented by the *Geist der Tiefe* could not be just cultural artefacts unique to Europeans or Americans, but must ultimately have their basis in the human mind as such. The decisive switch in Jung’s thinking seems to have come in 1928, when the Sinologist Richard Wilhelm sent him his translation of a Chinese text of Taoist alchemy, the *Tai I Gin Hua Dsung Dschü* or “Secret of the Golden Flower.”<sup>67</sup> After reading it, Jung decided to stop working on his *Red Book*, presumably because he realized that this Chinese text was based upon the very same premises as his own visions.<sup>68</sup> Since “The Secret of the Golden Flower” and his own *Red Book* were completely independent products of different cultures, and the previously unknown Chinese manuscript could not possibly have influenced his own work, Jung saw this as decisive proof that (in his own words) “beyond all differences of culture and consciousness, the psyche has a common substrate” that manifests itself in the form of “latent dispositions towards certain identical reactions.”<sup>69</sup> In terms that sound remarkably like modern cognitive science, he insisted that this “collective

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<sup>67</sup> *Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte: Ein chinesisches Lebensbuch*, Übersetzt und erläutert von Richard Wilhelm, mit einem europäischen Kommentar von C.G. Jung (München: Dornverlag Grete Ullmann, 1929).

<sup>68</sup> Jung, *Red Book*, 360 (epilogue written in 1959).

<sup>69</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, “Einführung,” in *Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte*, 16.

unconscious” common to all human beings is “simply the expression in the psyche of identical neurological structures” that produce “common instincts of representation (Imagination) and action.”<sup>70</sup>

What we see here is yet a further development of the basic idea of “two ways of thinking”: next to the rational perspective of daytime rationality (now conceptualized as the world of “consciousness”), there is the deeper non-rational perspective of the soul (now conceptualized as the world of “the unconscious”). The crucial point for our present concerns is that the historical and empirical manifestations of what Jung henceforth referred to as the collective unconscious happen to cover precisely the entire traditional reservoir of “rejected knowledge.” We are still dealing with everything that Enlightenment science and rationality found difficult or impossible to understand, to accept, and to accommodate.

### Antoine Faivre and Rejected Knowledge

In 1933 (just five years after Wilhelm’s text convinced him of the universal or global relevance of his personal visionary experiences and his studies of Western traditions of “rejected knowledge”), Jung became involved in the famous series of annual conferences known as the Eranos meetings in Switzerland. Due to his personal charisma and the force of his ideas, he became the dominant figure in that context until far after World War II, when other famous celebrities joined the scene, notably Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, and Henry Corbin.<sup>71</sup> In this context, Eliade most clearly represented the continuing concern of Eranos with *global* comparative perspectives in the study of religion, while Scholem focused more specifically on Jewish “mystical” traditions and Corbin on their Islamic “esoteric” counterparts. Thanks to Corbin, more than anyone else, the term “esotericism” began to play a significant role at Eranos and in related scholarly circles, notably the French *Université de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem*.<sup>72</sup> This terminology was adopted and promoted *inter alia* by another Eranos scholar, Corbin’s younger colleague and friend Antoine Faivre.

Faivre, of course, would become the pioneering scholar who succeeded in

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>71</sup> Hakl, *Eranos*; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277–314.

<sup>72</sup> Hakl, *Eranos*, 275–76 (English ed.)/521–24 (German 2nd ed.); Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 341–43ff.



putting “*Western esotericism*” on the map of academic research.<sup>73</sup> Thanks to his influence, the adjective “Western” became firmly established – although, admittedly, Faivre’s central concern was not with the West in all its variety but rather with the specifically *Christian* counterpart to Scholem’s Jewish and Corbin’s Islamic traditions. Faivre clearly understood “the West” in cultural rather than strictly geographical terms, as a domain dominated by Christian culture, although occasionally “‘visited’ by some Jewish, Islamic, or even far-Eastern religious traditions.”<sup>74</sup> In this context, he famously presented “Western esotericism” as a “form of thought” (*forme de pensée*) characterized by four intrinsic characteristics: correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, and transmutation.

Faivre derived his notion of a *forme de pensée* from his colleague Emile Poulat, and it is important to be precise about what the term meant to them. Both scholars insisted that it referred *not* to a theoretical concept residing in some kind of abstract mental space: a “form of thought” could exist only as the product of *specific* historical and cultural conditions.<sup>75</sup> In other words: there is no such thing as “esotericism” unless it is incarnated<sup>76</sup> in time and space – in this case as *Western* esotericism or, even more specifically (for both Faivre and Poulat) as *modern* Western esotericism beginning in the Renaissance.<sup>77</sup> It follows that if one were to conceive of an “Eastern esotericism” (however defined), *this would necessarily be something else*. By making comparisons between the two, one might discover both differences and similarities, but one should *not* expect to find different manifestations of sameness. This simple point is often overlooked, but is crucial: that two things are similar does not mean that they are identical. On the contrary, it means that they are different!<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 334–55.

<sup>74</sup> Antoine Faivre, *L’ésotérisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 8 (cf. slightly different variations of the passage in later editions and translations; cf. Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah,” 152 with note 4).

<sup>75</sup> Antoine Faivre, “Émile Poulat et notre domaine,” in *Un objet de science, le catholicisme: Réflexions autour de l’oeuvre d’Émile Poulat (en Sorbonne, 22–23 octobre 1999)*, ed. Valentine Zuber (Paris: Bayard, 2001), 213.

<sup>76</sup> On the relevance of the term “incarnation” in this context, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 350 note 350.

<sup>77</sup> “L’ésotérisme n’existe que dans un cadre géo-historique. ... Elle se dégage au temps de la Renaissance” (Faivre, “Emile Poulat et notre domaine,” 213)

<sup>78</sup> Similarity *implies* difference: two different things may be similar to a certain extent, but they can never be the same (for then they are no longer different, and there is no longer anything to compare). This is where we find the exact dividing line between scholarly comparison and religious or esoteric belief: scholarly comparativists may note multiple similarities between

To find out what is really going on in Faivre’s famous definition, I believe we should ask ourselves a simple question: what, according to his four characteristics, would *not* be considered esoteric? The answer I believe to be crystal clear once one sees it: Faivre’s “esoteric” form of thought is in fact the logical counterpart, the rhetorical “Other,” of what we might refer to as the “Enlightenment” form of thought!<sup>79</sup> Correspondences are non-causal connections, in sharp contrast with the instrumental causality (cause-and-effect) basic to Newtonian science. Living nature means that the world is not a dead mechanism or clockwork, as strict materialism would have it. That the imagination is an organ of perception and knowledge is the direct antithesis of Enlightenment (and positivist) empiricism, which typically dismissed the imagination as mere deceptive fantasy, a faculty of illusion. Faivre’s notion of mediation means that there are multiple subtle levels of reality intermediary between pure spirit and pure matter – again in contrast to the one-level (monistic) world of materialism and positivism. Transmutation, finally, means that human beings may go through an interior process of spiritual rebirth and purification modeled after alchemy, in contrast with the putative “rational subject” of Enlightenment philosophy (which must, of course, reject the language of interiority or practices of “spiritual alchemy” as Pietist obscurantism and pseudoscientific nonsense).

The conclusion will perhaps be surprising to some readers, but all of this means that Faivre’s “Western esotericism” is perfectly equivalent to what I have referred to as the Enlightenment’s reservoir of “rejected knowledge.”<sup>80</sup> This

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East and West, but only believers in some religious or esoteric truth will go a step further and claim that these are all the reflection of one and the same true, unchanging, universal, hidden, spiritual reality.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> To avoid any misunderstandings, this does not mean that I would return to the classic Faivrean approach. If Faivre’s definition can be deconstructed as an attempt (perhaps unconscious or unintentional) to capture the structural counterpart of the “Enlightenment form of thought,” this strengthens my thesis that what we mean by “esotericism” is in fact nothing but the reservoir of rejected knowledge: a mental category created by Enlightenment ideologies as the polemical “Other” that they needed to define and demarcate their own identity. The problem with Faivre’s definition lies in its debt to the phenomenological perspectives (broadly understood) that are associated with the Eranos tradition, which have an inherent tendency towards the reification of scholarly constructs and therefore make it hard to avoid essentialist interpretations. In short, if esotericism is presented as a specific form of thought defined by four intrinsic (i.e. necessary) characteristics, it will inevitably be perceived as a “thing” that somehow “exists” in the world out there. By contrast to such a “realist” understanding, grounded in the reification of imaginal concepts, my approach

becomes even clearer if we just slightly reformulate the four criteria: they are really all about analogy and occult correspondences, animism, worlds of the imagination, higher spiritual dimensions, and interior rebirth. By means of his four “intrinsic characteristics,” Faivre in fact defined what the radical counterpart of Enlightenment ideology would look like if one were to systematize it.

### **Enlightenment**

Instrumental causality  
Mechanism  
Monism/materialism  
Rationalism

### **Esotericism *sensu* Faivre**

Correspondences  
Living Nature  
Imagination/Mediation  
Transmutation

From a point of view that is understood as “esoteric” in the Faivrean sense, it is the Enlightenment form of thought that becomes “rejected knowledge.” In short, once again, we are dealing with “two ways of thinking” based on mutually exclusive premises.

## **Not Theory but Method**

Now what are the implications for our dilemma of “Western” versus “global” esotericism? I have been arguing that, ever since the eighteenth century, the contentious reservoir of “rejected knowledge” had been understood as not just Western but global: in Enlightenment terms, not just Europe but indeed the whole world was full of “magic” and “superstition,” full of “irrationality” and “occult nonsense” (while according to the Romantic and Occultist counter-perspective, of course, this meant that the whole world was full of wonderful, delightful, thrilling mysteries!) If this is the case, then should we not follow Granholm’s suggestion and forego the term “Western”?

As far as I can tell, there is precisely one good reason to resist that suggestion, and this reason is not theoretical but *methodological* in nature. From a theoretical perspective, it is perfectly possible indeed – perhaps even necessary – to conceive of a global field of human ideas and practices that display a sufficient degree of similarity to study it as one complex whole. As recently suggested by Egil Asprem, it should be possible to study such a field by means of standard methods of cross-cultural comparison, with careful attention to the

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remains “nominalist” (Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 368ff).

relation between culturally determined differences and structural similarities.<sup>81</sup> Scholars who point out that those theoretical features deemed most typical of “Western esotericism” are not just Western but can also be found in many places elsewhere in the world have a strong point: for instance, we might think here of Faivre’s four characteristics, but also of von Stuckrad’s emphasis on hidden, secret, or higher knowledge, or, for that matter, my own emphasis on gnosis, ecstatic or altered states of consciousness, cosmotheism, and so on. All these features can clearly be found all over the world, thereby inviting cross-cultural comparison of their various manifestations. In short, from a *theoretical* perspective based on the search for structural components that lend themselves to comparison, the attempt to keep “esotericism” confined strictly to the West seems a “mission impossible.”

And yet, I believe it makes sense to continue speaking of “Western esotericism.” *Not*, to be sure, for theoretical reasons, but strictly for reasons of method – and more specifically, of *historical* method. As formulated by Bruce Lincoln in his *Theses on Method*, to practice history of religions “in a fashion consistent with the discipline’s claim of title” means

to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, communities, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.<sup>82</sup>

If we apply historical method consistently, then *our object of study is never “esotericism” in any strict theoretical sense*, for such an object exists only as a theoretical construct in our own heads and not as a historical or empirical reality “out there.” What we should really forego is the illusion that we are studying some kind of “phenomenon out there,” called “esotericism”!<sup>83</sup> Rather, our task

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<sup>81</sup> Asprem, “Beyond the West.”

<sup>82</sup> Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method,” in *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>83</sup> At this point I have to take issue with some formulations by Egil Asprem, who writes that the various “historicist programmes in the study of esotericism ... revolve around the same hard core: that *esotericism is a specific historical phenomenon, grounded in specific historical events and processes*” (“Beyond the West,” 12; emphasis in original), and states that my historicist perspective looks at esotericism as “an object to be discursively analyzed” (*ibid.*, 19). My perspective is indeed radically historicist (cf. Hanegraaff, “Power of Ideas,” 266–67, with note 29; cf. Michael Stausberg, “What is *It* All About? Some Reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 227; Olav Hammer, “Deconstructing ‘Western Esotericism’: On Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*,” *Religion* 43, no.

consists of studying a wide range of quite specific and different, historically situated personalities, currents, ideas, practices, discourses, communities, or institutions, the representatives of which *may or may not* happen to think of themselves as “esotericists,”<sup>84</sup> or of their perspectives as “esoteric” (or any equivalent term, in any relevant language). If we choose to categorize all these different materials under the heading of “esotericism,” we do so simply because it is helpful to our research agendas to highlight certain things that they have in common and that make them stand out for us as somewhat “similar.”<sup>85</sup> If we categorize them, more specifically, as *Western* esotericism, this is not in order to suggest that they are Western manifestations of “esotericism” in general (that would be the theoretical perspective again!), but simply because the only way in which they appear to us *at all* is as specific products of Western culture. This means that the adjective “Western” is not understood as a qualifier within a larger field (“esotericism”), but is used to highlight the specificity of this particular domain of research.

Seen from such a perspective, the theoretical baggage of “Western esotericism” is in fact quite light. What makes it heavy is the added weight of specific assumptions about the nature of “the West,” with all their far-reaching ideological and political implications. I do not mean to imply that

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2 (2013): 242), but explicitly rejects any understanding of esotericism as “a specific historical phenomenon” or “object” (see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 368–79; cf. “Power of Ideas,” 268–69). In a private communication (24 June 2015), Asprem agreed that these formulations are somewhat ambiguous and should be adapted to avoid misunderstandings.

<sup>84</sup> It is a common misunderstanding that if person X is being discussed within the category of “esotericism,” that automatically makes him/her “an esotericist.” In my opinion, it makes a lot of sense to discuss e.g. Marsilio Ficino as an important figure in the study of esotericism, but it makes little sense to describe him as an “esotericist”: that label did not become available before the 19th century and should not be applied retrospectively. To clarify this point, it might be useful to draw a comparison with the study of homosexuality, again using Ficino as an example. It is clear from his work that he was erotically attracted to males, and this makes him relevant to the history of homoeroticism and homosexuality, but labels of self-identification such as “homosexual” or “gay” were not yet available to him, and it would be anachronistic to describe him as such (see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Under the Mantle of Love: The Mystical Eroticism of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno,” in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, eds. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Jeffrey J. Kripal (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008 + New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 184–94, with note 42).

<sup>85</sup> Similarities do not need to be “features” or “characteristics” of “phenomena” or “objects.” From my particular perspective, which is informed by an interest in polemical discourse and identity politics, what they have in common (and therefore makes them similar at least in that particular respect) is simply their acquired status as “rejected knowledge” since the period of the Enlightenment.

by speaking of “Western esotericism” in a strictly methodological sense, we can escape from those burdens – on the contrary, I am sure that we cannot. What I do mean to suggest is that these theoretical assumptions themselves can and should be historicized. Where did they come from, how, and why? As I hope to make clear in the final section of this article, the study of “Western esotericism” is uniquely qualified to push these questions forward into new directions that have not been explored before.

### Comparing the West to the Rest

From my argument so far, it should be clear that I emphatically disagree with the notion that a historical or historicist perspective discourages or excludes comparative approaches.<sup>86</sup> On the contrary, historicism is perfectly compatible with comparative methods and larger theoretical questions: it excludes only those specific theoretical and comparative perspectives that are grounded in the denial of historicity.

One important way of making the historical study of Western esotericism fruitful to larger agendas of cross-cultural comparison on a global scale, I would suggest, is by focusing on the recurring idea of “two ways of thinking” to which I have been calling attention above. As we have seen, Tylor thought in terms of “magic” versus “science”; Lévy-Bruhl of “participation” versus “instrumental causality”; German Romantic mesmerists of the “nightside of nature” versus “daytime rationality”; Carl Gustav Jung of the “collective unconscious” versus “rational consciousness”; and this short list could easily be expanded further (for instance, think of Max Weber’s notion of “enchantment” versus “disenchantment”<sup>87</sup>). Obviously these theories are far from identical. For all their differences, however, they are structurally similar in at least one respect: they all try to respond to a specific *problem*<sup>88</sup> that was caused directly by the remarkable success of modern science and Enlightenment rationality, and its subsequent spread all over the globe. This problem, as perceived by

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<sup>86</sup> As noted by Asprem, “historicists have commonly viewed the comparative method with suspicion.” He correctly interprets this as an unfortunate legacy of the battle against “religionist,” perennialist, or Traditionalist assumptions in the study of religion, and concludes that “[w]hile the rejection of these untenable projects was understandable, a regrettable long-term side effect has been a suspicion of *all* comparativist projects” (“Beyond the West,” 5–6, and cf. 20).

<sup>87</sup> See now Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*.

<sup>88</sup> For the concept of *Problemggeschichte* that is implicit in my analysis here, see Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 5 and passim; Hanegraaff, “Power of Ideas,” 256.

Western thinkers ever since the 17th/18th centuries, consisted in the simple fact that human beings so often did *not* act rationally but kept holding on to worldviews, ideas and practices that seemed to conflict with the new ideas of science. Even more worrying was the fact that even if the arguments of science and rationality were clearly explained to them, this often did not seem to make much of a difference. On the contrary, one could even observe the phenomenon of *deliberately* anti-rational and anti-scientific reactions, not just among the uneducated but among highly trained intellectuals as well. How could it be that such “superstitious nonsense” was and remained so attractive to so many people? What did it offer them that science and rationality could not? Whence came its power and its appeal? Was there perhaps some kind of mystery about it, something that rationalists just failed to see?

Such questions are at the bottom of all those theories about “two ways of thinking” referred to above. What made them possible and, indeed, inevitable was the momentous confrontation between the new ideologies of rational/scientific modernity and *everything else*. This point cannot be emphasized strongly enough: the confrontation pinned a very recent newcomer, modern Western intellectual culture, against *all* the cultures of the rest of the world and against the *whole* history of humanity roughly prior to the seventeenth century. From a broader perspective of world history, the phenomenon of Enlightenment science and rationality is clearly *an anomaly*: it appeared just very recently, in a relatively small part of the world, although it has been spreading like a virus ever since. Because modern academics are themselves products of this anomalous phenomenon, they are tempted to see it as the norm or the rule against which everything else should be measured.<sup>89</sup> But from a historical perspective, I would argue, it is exactly the other way around. Enlightenment rationality and modern science are the exception; its opponents represent the default.

This fundamental fact keeps being obscured by the influence of extremely influential “presentist” narratives in the history of philosophy and science, all of them rooted in the idea of a “natural,” organic and teleological development of reason from the supposed “birth of philosophy in ancient Greece” to its final triumph in modern science. In fact, I would argue, such historiographies are ideological tools for promoting the project of modernity: grounded in eclectic method,<sup>90</sup> they are designed to “demonstrate” the self-evident superiority and

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<sup>89</sup> T.G. Ashplant and Andrian Wilson, “Present-Centred History and the Problem of Historical Knowledge,” *The Historical Journal* 31, no. 2 (1988), 253–74.

<sup>90</sup> For the crucial phenomenon of “eclectic historiography” on Enlightenment foundations,

historical necessity of the particular worldviews, perspectives, and personal preferences of those who invented them. With Hegel as a particularly obvious example, whenever some thinker has designed (and therefore controls) such a historical narrative, one invariably finds that he himself is situated comfortably at the very summit of the hierarchy and represents the very culmination of world history.<sup>91</sup>

If we are consistent in rejecting such narratives of evolutionary progress as misleading ideologies, we end up with a radical historicism (or rather, *historism*<sup>92</sup>) that thoroughly relativizes the very idea that “reason” can be the normative yardstick for comparing beliefs, worldviews, practices, or mentalities. By necessity, its place will then be taken by an *empirical* approach that seeks to compare the global reservoir of beliefs, worldviews, practices, or mentalities as objectively as possible on the basis strictly of their observable features. If we apply such a global empirical perspective, we should not be surprised to find (for instance) that Antoine Faivre’s four characteristics of “Western esotericism” have such close equivalents elsewhere in the world. On the contrary: how could it possibly be otherwise? What Faivre’s definition really tried to capture – whether intentionally or not, and successfully or not – was the structure of a form of thought, a mentality, a way of looking at the world, or of participating in the world, that has been perfectly natural to the human mind all over the globe and for as long back as we can tell. I suggest that there is much we need to learn about it (for instance, it would seem to be a natural topic for the Cognitive Study of Religion), but we hardly need to *account* for its existence. It is the default. The really surprising and puzzling phenomenon (that we *do* need to understand and account for, even explain) is that, after so many centuries, the human species has quite recently begun to reject, deny, or suppress some of its most natural forms of cognition and experience in favour of a strict, almost ascetic discipline or regime of reason: one that does *not* come so naturally to us at all, but only artificially and at the cost of great mental effort.

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leading to deliberately selective and biased narratives, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 129–30, 136, 140, 146, 148–52.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “‘Everybody is Right’: Frank Visser’s Analysis of Ken Wilber,” [www.integralworld.net](http://www.integralworld.net).

<sup>92</sup> For this distinction, see Hanegraaff, “Power of Ideas,” 266 with note 29.



## Concluding Remarks

Would it make sense to refer to the many expressions of such “non-rational” ways of thinking, in all parts of the world, by the term “esotericism”? Frankly I do not think so. “Western esotericism” has emerged as a convenient label for the various beliefs, practices, and traditions of knowledge that the Enlightenment has rejected in its own backyard, so to speak. Why would people in Africa, Japan, India, Latin America, or Antarctica, feel any need to import this specifically Western category of “esotericism” to speak about *their* own traditional beliefs and practices – as if Western Europe were still the prototype to which everything else must be compared? In my opinion, it would be yet another form of terminological imperialism if we now tried to project this terminology on to the rest of the world.

To prevent any misunderstandings: the fact that originally European esoteric or occultist ideas and practices have now spread all over the globe<sup>93</sup> is a different matter entirely. That it results in surprising new mutations that are eventually not just Western anymore is yet another matter. Many of those mutations have traveled back to the West, only to be (mis)understood there as the “authentic” voices of non-Western spiritualities, and this is an important and fascinating phenomenon as well. And it does not stop there either, for the dominance of Western popular media ensures that further mutations of those hybrid mixtures are continually fed back to the rest of the globe in turn. All of this is important to consider in depth. The globalization of *Western* (!) esotericism is indeed a major direction for future research, and not least for reasons of linguistic competence it will require intensive collaboration between Western and non-Western scholars. However, *all of this falls within the purview of history, not theory*. On a more theoretical and comparative level, next to the study of Western esotericism (including the globalization of its beliefs and practices) we obviously need to compare beliefs, practices, forms of experience, and so on, wherever we find them. But such research is simply the core business of the comparative study of religion: it already exists, and I do not see that the category of “esotericism” contributes anything new to it.

In sum, my recommendations are as follows. We should (1) hold on to the category of “Western esotericism,” but (2) give very serious attention to the “globalization of Western esotericism,” and (3) promote comparative studies that focus on both similarity and difference. The first two concerns are central to the study of Western Esotericism, whereas the third one pertains

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<sup>93</sup> Bogdan and Djurdjevic, *Occultism in a Global Perspective*.

to the study of religion more generally. With respect to global comparative perspectives, I suggest it is important to try and improve our understanding of those specific “ways of thinking” that Enlightenment science and rationality find so hard to understand, because they resist discursive language and logical analysis. This is perhaps the most difficult part of our task, but it might be the most fascinating too.

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