



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Here, There & Everywhere

Esoteric Practices and the Global Agenda

Hanegraaff, W.J.

DOI

[10.1163/15700682-bja10152](https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10152)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Method & Theory in the Study of Religion

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hanegraaff, W. J. (2025). Here, There & Everywhere: Esoteric Practices and the Global Agenda. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 37(3), 300-314.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-bja10152>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



BRILL

METHOD AND THEORY IN THE STUDY
OF RELIGION 37 (2025) 300–314

METHOD
& THEORY *in the*
STUDY OF
RELIGION
brill.com/mtsr

Here, There & Everywhere

Esoteric Practices and the Global Agenda

Wouter J. Hanegraaff | ORCID: 0000-0001-9570-2010
Professor, History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents,
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands
w.j.hanegraaff@uva.nl

Received 30 May 2024 | Accepted 20 April 2025 |
Published online 24 June 2025

Abstract

The study of esotericism emerged during the 1990s as a new academic program of research focused on previously-neglected historical traditions in Western culture. During the first decade of the 2000s, it established itself as a new field that was widely (although not exclusively) referred to as “Western esotericism.” But during the 2010s, questions began to be raised about this focus on the occident, leading to the emerging new agenda of creating a “global history of esotericism.” I will argue that the initial proposals in this direction, while undoubtedly inspired by the best of intentions, are unconvincing on a theoretical level and unintendedly Eurocentric. By focusing on “esoteric” *practices* rather than *discourse*, the new CAS-E project may have found a way forward that avoids these deficiencies. While its immediate predecessors are weakened by an oppositional logic of mutual exclusion, the CAS-E agenda of global comparativism is perfectly compatible with historical research focused on esotericism in Western culture.

Keywords

esotericism – esoteric practices – historiography – global history of religion – comparativism – translation

•••

il ne s'agit plus de juger notre passé au nom d'une vérité que notre présent serait seul à détenir; il s'agit de risquer la destruction du sujet de connaissance dans la volonté, indéfiniment déployée, de savoir.

FOUCAULT 1971: 172

••

1 The Original Historiographical Agenda

The study of esotericism was driven originally not by a theoretical or comparativist but by a historiographical research agenda. It responded to a deeply undesirable situation in academic research that no longer exists today and may be hard to imagine for younger scholars. The easiest way for me to illustrate it is with reference to my personal experiences when I was a younger scholar myself. In September 1990, I attended my first major academic conference, the 16th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) in Rome. Organized on a different continent every five years, the IAHR was the largest podium for scholars of religion on a global scale. But to my surprise and disappointment, I discovered that among the many sessions and panels, *not even a single one* was devoted to any of the historical currents or traditions in which I was particularly interested, such as Hermeticism, Occultism, Theosophy, or the New Age. None of this seemed to even exist in academic conversations. With the exceptions of Gnosticism, Manicheism and the so-called “New Religions,” the history of religion in Europe and America was covered by just a large section on Old Testament and Judaism followed by three sections on Christianity in the first centuries, the middle ages, and modern times.¹ The global history of religion was reigning supreme at the IAHR in 1990, with much attention to comparative approaches; but religion in Europe and America was dominated by Old Testament studies and Church History and left essentially to the theologians. There was virtually no room for anything

1 See the massive conference volume edited by Ugo Bianchi (1994), with complete overview of sections and papers in the introduction.

that contemporary scholars would see as falling under the “esotericism” rubric; but whenever I mentioned such topics to established scholars, they responded with incomprehension or polite suspicion. They had no idea what I was talking about, but I could tell that they wondered whether I might be some closet esotericist or occultist who just pretended to be a scholar. Otherwise, why would I be so interested in that stuff?

It is this situation – the almost total neglect of esotericism (and much else) in standard histories of religion in the West – that Antoine Faivre and I set out to change. We needed to overcome quite a lot of resistance and prejudice to gain admission at the next IAHR congress, in Mexico City in 1995 (Faivre and Hanegraaff 1998); and while we were accepted at the following 2000 congress in Durban as well, the organizers placed all our sessions in a separate building that caused us to be isolated from the rest of the proceedings. Only at the 2005 IAHR congress in Tokyo were our sessions on esotericism finally treated as covering a perfectly normal and obviously legitimate field of research. This must have been caused by a combination of factors. The study of religion itself, like the general academic climate in the humanities, had changed quite dramatically after 1990 and had certainly become much more pluralistic. The new journal *Aries* had been setting new academic quality standards since 2001, and scholars of religion were taking note. The brand-new *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (DGWE) now demonstrated conclusively how large this field really was, and how much had been treated as irrelevant or non-existent by previous generations. On an anecdotal level, I vividly remember how Gary Lease (a well-known scholar known for his no-nonsense perspective) kept approaching me during the Tokyo conference, whenever he saw my face, to congratulate me on the DGWE. He had bought it at the conference stand and was reading it in his hotel room each night. It was a revelation to him that all these traditions existed in the West, because he had never even heard of them. Most of all, he appreciated the fact that they were treated historically and without a trace of esoteric apologetics.

That memory may serve to illustrate my point. The original study of esotericism was new, exciting, cutting-edge. It was all about filling those large *historical* gaps in standard accounts of religion in Western culture. It demonstrated that there had always been so much more than just the well-known official history of churches and heresies. All these forgotten or suppressed traditions should be taken seriously by academics, just like anything else, and studied from a critical scholarly perspective. This would have to result in new, entirely different perspectives on the history of religion in Western culture. Nothing that had been taken for granted about “the West” would ever be the same! The new scholarship in esotericism prioritized empirical, historical, bottom-up

investigation of neglected primary source materials relevant to specific historical currents, traditions, organizations, personalities, and ideas that had been treated as virtually non-existent by previous generations and should now finally be taken seriously. This was not a typological or comparative project concerned with structural patterns or trans-historical universalia, which is why it distanced itself not just from essentialist, perennialist or *sui generis* concepts of “esotericism” but also from the poststructuralist focus on an “esoteric discourse” stipulated by definitional *fiat* (Hanegraaff 2012: 361–367; 2013).

By the early 2010s, it seemed evident that the battle had been won. The study of religion in Western culture was no longer dominated by Christian-theological agendas, and serious attention to “esoteric” materials had become perfectly normal. No longer did it occur to academic gatekeepers (conference organizers, university professors, editorial boards, or academic book acquisition editors) to be suspicious or dismissive of scholars just because of their interest in such “weird” topics. On the contrary, the latter became ever more popular and attractive – not just for those who thought of themselves as “scholars of esotericism” but also for academics from other fields with different disciplinary agendas. This *de facto* normalization of esotericism research combined with a pluralization of academic methods and theoretical perspectives resulted in a new situation with entirely new challenges.

2 The Search for a Global Alternative

For students who develop an interest in esotericism today, it has become less intuitive to perceive the field in terms of “rejected knowledge.” They may be aware of the fact that “esoteric” traditions or ideas used to be marginalized by scholars and written out of European/American religious or cultural history roughly before the 1990s – but so what? That was a long time ago. For them, all the relevant materials are simply available for study and just as acceptable in academic contexts as any other topic of research. The phenomenon of severe academic neglect or suspicion that was so obvious to my generation no longer exists for them, and the battle against Christian-theological dominance in the history of religions has been won a long time ago. Moreover, partly depending on their disciplinary backgrounds, contemporary academics do not necessarily think about esotericism in historical terms at all. But *if* they conceive of a “history of esotericism,” then shouldn’t that history be global as a matter of principle instead of just narrowly European or Western? Behind such lines of argument lies a cluster of influential “critical theories” broadly associated with Marxism, decolonial theory, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, whose

representatives may often disagree among themselves but generally tend to think of “Western Civ” as a narrow ethnocentric concept riddled with imperialist, colonialist, or orientalist agendas (e.g. Cusset 2008: 166–171).

As a result, and understandably enough, it would seem that the younger generation of scholars does not necessarily see so clearly what the academic mission of esotericism research was supposed to be all about. We might even speak of an identity crisis, as illustrated by a recent editorial at the occasion of the ten-year existence of the journal *Correspondences*. The two editors-in-chief (including one of the founding editors) appear to have come close to giving up on the field altogether:

More existentially, we haven’t always been sure about the need for a(nother) journal for esotericism studies, or, indeed, the field of esotericism or the concept itself. Do we require the category of esotericism in order to study the phenomena we have gathered in and around it? Do we need the network of scholars, the canon of figures, groups, and currents they have categorized as esotericism, and the methods and theories they have advocated for esotericism studies? (Bakker and Roukema 2022: 236)

A major cause of this crisis of confidence, I suggest, lies in the simple fact that (along with a general trend in the humanities to move attention away from history towards contemporary issues) the original historiographical agenda has begun receding into the background. Rewriting the history of Western culture, by paying special attention to all those traditions that used to be marginalized or excluded, is no longer seen by many scholars as such a particularly important or urgent project. It may even get framed as a conservative attempt to “save” or “defend” the West against its critics.

As long as “esotericism” was just a pragmatic *label* of convenience (Hanegraaff 2022b)² to cover a wide variety of historical traditions in Western culture that did not necessarily have much more in common than the fact of having been marginalized and discredited in academia on the basis of a specific type of polemics, the question of *definition* was perhaps interesting as an intellectual exercise but not of any crucial importance to what the field was all

2 Many scholars seem to find it hard to *not* see “esotericism” as a “phenomenon” (instead of a mere label), as illustrated by Dimitry Okropiridze’s assumption that my work is based on “a thesis of ontological access (‘we know esotericism to be x’/‘we know esotericism to be constituted of x, y, z’)” (2021: 244, also 220, 227, 233). On the contrary, I have never stopped emphasizing that the sources we study cannot possibly tell us “what esotericism *is*” but only what historical actor x or y *thinks* it is (Hanegraaff 1998: 11 and passim; 2012: 3, 363 note 399, 368–369, 377; 2013: 258–259, 268 with note 32, 270).

about. However, to the precise extent that this original program makes way for a comparative project of analyzing “esotericism” on a global scale, in a broader academic climate that tends to privilege theory over empiricism by default, the field comes to depend for its very existence on theoretical concepts and *a priori* definitions of *what “it” “is.”* So far, in my opinion, the proposed solutions have not been impressive. As noted correctly by Engler and Gardiner, based on a representative sample of recent arguments,

In each of these cases, *secrecy* constitutes the bulk of a proposed bridge between the western concept of *esotericism* and comparable terms in other geographical and cultural contexts. ... [T]he implicit definitions of esotericism ... are too thin to support more than a loose analogy. They move too quickly to accept the hypothesis that *esotericism* applies to a cross-cultural category. They come close to ticking a single box (*secrecy*) in order to establish that something is an esotericism. (Engler and Gardiner 2024: 46)

That is exactly right. If we want to study the dynamics of *secrecy* in a global comparative context, I see no compelling need to call it “esotericism,” but excellent reasons to refrain from doing so. Straightforward equivalents of “secret,” “secrets” or “secrecy” are readily available in most non-Western languages, from antiquity to the present, but this is not the case for “esotericism.”³ This modern and specifically European noun first appeared in German (*Esoterismus*) towards the end of the eighteenth century and functions as a calque (a “loan translation”) in other linguistic contexts.⁴ As a modern academic term, it carries a heavy burden of historically-conditioned meanings and connotations that have little to do with secrecy but a lot with polemical and apologetic discourses that emerged specifically in Western Europe (Hanegraaff 2012). Whether these discursive dynamics have structural parallels in non-European cultures remains as yet an open question (Otto 2013: 239; cf. Saif and Leoni 2021: 5; Hanegraaff 2025: 23–29).

In my opinion, to insist on projecting this specifically Western-European “esotericism” terminology onto the rest of the world (especially if the “secrecy” family of words is readily available as a non-Eurocentric alternative for

3 For the rich “secrecy” terminology available in many different languages, as distinct from “esotericism” as a calque in those languages, see multiple contributions in Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023b.

4 The standard reference is Neugebauer-Wölk 2013; only the adjective goes back to antiquity (Lucian of Samosata): Hanegraaff 2005: 336.

referring to what is actually intended) amounts to a form of terminological imperialism that runs counter to global decolonial and emancipatory agendas (Hanegraaff 2015: 86; 2024; Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023a: 11–14). I have found that proponents of a global history of esotericism, in marked contrast with the CAS-E agenda, often seem remarkably blind to their own Eurocentric or “Western-centric” biases. Michael Bergunder states that “esotericism,” like “religion,” is today a common term “everywhere in the non-European world and in all non-European languages” (Bergunder 2020: 47) – a highly relevant observation that might lead us to study the chronological history of how these terms developed in conversation with local vocabularies during the colonial period. However, Bergunder then goes out of his way to defend a radical *anti*-historical presentism that not just denies but even claims to *reverse* linear chronology (Bergunder 2011: 42–43; 2020: 66–69),⁵ meanwhile relying exclusively on secondary sources written in German or English and heavily privileging Christian authors from the West over their Hindu, Islamic, and Buddhist counterparts.⁶ Following closely in Bergunder’s footsteps, Julian Strube believes he is providing evidence for a global rather than just a Western esoteric vocabulary by pointing out that European intellectuals since the seventeenth century were using adjectives such as “esoteric, secret, occult, or arcane” (and nouns such as “‘mysteries,’ ‘gnosis,’ and ‘Cabala’”) in their discussions of Brahmins, the I Ching, and various other non-Western traditions (Strube 2021b: 354, 362; see also 2023; 2024).

They certainly did, but that is precisely how terminological imperialism works. As a matter of course, and not necessarily inspired by any bad intentions, these scholars were imposing their own *Western* Eurocentric vocabulary

5 Bergunder reads Foucault’s genealogy through the lenses of an extreme presentism that takes its cue from Derrida, Laclau and Butler; but as illustrated by the motto above the present article, this stands in stark conflict with Foucault’s actual argument in the famous article (Foucault 1971, quoted in German by Bergunder) on whose authority Bergunder relies. Nietzsche and Foucault were exposing the hidden metaphysical assumptions of historiography as understood during the heyday of positivism, notably its obsession with “origins” (*Ursprung, Entstehung, Herkunft*), in favour of a radical anti-metaphysical “*wirkliche Historie*” (referred to as “genealogy”) that happens to be in perfect accord with the understanding of history that I have myself been defending since the 1990s. Bergunder’s argument rests on a fatal confusion between historical *perspectivism* (e.g. Foucault 1971: 163) and a radical anti-hermeneutic *presentism* which claims that we have no access to the past because any authorial intentions, meanings or contents that *seem* to be present in our primary sources are strictly just our own contemporary projections. On the “tragic view of language” that underpins such a doctrine, see e.g. Compagnon 2004: 88–92, here 91.

6 Section 3 in Bergunder 2020: 93–103 (Christianity, 10 pages), 87–88 (Hinduism, 2 pages), 88–90 (Islam, 2 pages), 90–93 (Buddhism, 2 ½ pages).

on non-Western religious traditions while conveniently ignoring or appropriating non-Western vocabularies and indigenous systems of knowledge. Asian authors ended up discussing their own traditions in terms that had been introduced by the English. This included the key concept “idolatry,” a generic category of strong condemnation that had no equivalent in Bengali and for which a new term was created (*pauttalikatā*; see Strube 2022: 204). If we place these debates in their historical contexts, what Strube would like us to perceive as early-modern instances of a “global history of esotericism” is actually grounded in standard hegemonic ideologies of Western superiority that define European identity against the presumed inferiority of “pagans” (practitioners of “idolatry”) or “Orientals.” These Orientalist scholars were obviously writing from positions of colonial privilege; and precisely because their conceptual frameworks enjoyed high levels of discursive dominance, they were readily available for strategic appropriation by non-Western actors as well.⁷ In sharp contrast to the CAS-E project, it appears that neither Bergunder nor Strube sees the importance of moving beyond official Western-academic anglophone discourse to ask how non-Western actors might *originally* have been writing and speaking, in *their* own languages, about what those Western academics were calling “esoteric” “occult,” or “arcane.”

I see this as the crucial flaw also in Asprem’s and Strube’s recent proposal for a global history of esotericism. After a stab at the supposed naivety of historians who believe in “simply uncovering a set of sources out there that can be made to speak of ‘esotericism’” (Asprem and Strube 2021: 247), the argument proceeds as follows:

it does not follow that we thereby lose access to our sources, that esotericism doesn’t “really exist,” or that *anything* could be made into esotericism on the scholar’s whim. What the approach leaves us with in terms of defining a field of study is in fact very precise and empirically accessible: starting with the existence of *the term itself* [my emphasis] it points us to the discourses in which it is articulated, by real flesh-and-blood people, along with the contexts in which they live and act, and asks us to pay attention to the meaning-making processes and negotiations over the term’s significance *in those contexts* and *to those people*. (Asprem and Strube 2021: 247)⁸

7 An excellent example mentioned by Strube himself would be raja Krishnachandra’s evident appropriation of standard Platonic-Orientalist narratives (Strube 2021b: 355–357).

8 I am at a loss to explain the essentialist implication of the statement that esotericism *does* “really exist.” Similar to the unconsciously-Eurocentric critique of a presumed Eurocentrism,

This sounds very promising and sympathetic. But since the entire project now rests entirely on *the term itself*, what is actually meant by “the term”? In whose language is “it” written or spoken, and by whom? In which period does “it” exist, and in whose culture? As it turns out, Bergunder’s radical presentism provides the key to how these questions are answered: any global history of esotericism will have to start with the *Western* (predominantly English) “esoteric” vocabulary that emerged in “the nineteenth century as the crucial period” (Asprem and Strube 2021: 257–250, here 247).

The argument is presented rhetorically as “anti-Eurocentric” and “consistently historical” but I believe it amounts to the exact opposite. The intellectual culture of global colonialism during the long nineteenth century, with its Western terminological apparatus expressed in European languages (notably English), becomes the privileged and exclusive vantage-point for exploring and discussing *all* other cultures that exist in geographical space and have existed in historical time (Bergunder 2020: 66–68, section “Unhintergebarkeit der Gegenwart”). I would find it hard to think of a more extreme recipe for present-centered Eurocentrism. With respect to all previous periods of history, from antiquity to the present, it seems to exemplify the “enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson 1963: 12; Ashplant and Wilson 1988: 261; Curry 1989: 2; Zuber 2021: 12) that is typical of the presentist gaze. By claiming discursive primacy for “our” modern linguistic and epistemological self-evidences, in English, it makes it impossible for pre-modern cultures or intellectual systems to be understood on their own terms in their own vocabularies, to be taken seriously as equal discussion partners, and thus to potentially challenge the stipulated privilege of our recent (and therefore, presumably, most “advanced”) poststructuralist-deconstructionist discourse. Furthermore, by a structurally similar logic, it seems to exemplify precisely the “coloniality of knowledge” (Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023a: 3–4; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 106; Quijano 2007: 169)⁹ through which non-Western languages and knowledge systems are reduced to a strictly subordinate position. Again, it would seem to deny them any independent power and agency as equal discussion partners that might potentially challenge the self-evident assumptions of “our” global anglophone discourse. Far from facilitating intercultural bridge-building and genuine dialogue (based on a willingness to

critiques of essentialism often fall prey to a common psychological fallacy known as “psychological essentialism” (Medin and Ortony 1989: 183–187).

9 In Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s argument, next to the “first empire” of physical-political domination and the “second empire” of global commercial-military exploitation, the “third ‘metaphysical’ empire” commits nothing less than *linguicide* and *epistemicide*.

“listen” and try to “understand” perspectives whose core assumptions might be radically at odds with our own; Hanegraaff and Mukhopadhyay 2023a: 7–14), it strikes me as the recipe for a modern hegemonic monologue premised on the superiority, rather than the historically contingent nature, of Western deconstructionist discourse.¹⁰

I am aware that these are heavy critiques against a project of global comparative “esotericism” that is undoubtedly inspired by the best intentions. But to avoid walking into dead alleys or remaining trapped in the magic circle of Eurocentrism from which we would all so much like to escape, I believe we must look beyond surface rhetoric to perceive what is really being proposed. It sounds generous, sympathetic, and respectful of non-Western agency to write that such notions as esotericism, occultism, or Theosophy “were not ready-made ‘Western concepts’ that could be exported into the rest of the world” but “were shaped within global exchanges” (Asprem and Strube 2021: 247). They certainly were, but the fact is that those exchanges occurred in a colonial context marked by highly unequal relations in terms of political, economic, and discursive power, where language functioned as valued *cultural capital* in strategic negotiations.¹¹ The unquestionable agency of non-Western actors¹² does not change the fact that almost all these exchanges would have to be conducted in the language of the colonizers – a language that was dominated by “esoteric” vocabulary of specifically Western provenance and full of Eurocentric implications.¹³

10 The impossibility of “listening” and “understanding” in terms of non-hegemonic dialogue follows with strict necessity from the key deconstructionist logic basic to Bergunder 2020: 66–67. The current popularity of these philosophical background assumptions may explain why many younger scholars seem puzzled by my insistence on “listening to the sources” (Strube 2021a: 45; 2021c: 1186; Okropiridze 2021: 220; Bakker and Roukema 2022: 240 note 12). For my response to these critiques, with reference to Gadamerian hermeneutics, see Hanegraaff 2023 and 2024b, against the background of my analysis of the paradigmatic Gadamer-Derrida encounter in Hanegraaff 2022: 308–351, esp. 311–327 and 342–351.

11 For the central importance of capital in the Theosophical movement of colonial Bengal, I am indebted to Mukhopadhyay 2025.

12 Conclusively demonstrated by Strube’s discussion of global tantra, in an instructive monograph that positions itself unfortunately against a “Eurocentrism” supposedly exemplified by my work. For the record, a “diffusionist reaction” based on belief in “a world populated by passive recipients” (Strube 2022: 28) may exist in Strube’s polemical imagination but certainly does not in my publications.

13 In terms of the history of Western identity politics, I would now refer to the European intellectual discourse directed against “rejected knowledge” (analyzed in Hanegraaff 2012) as an *Internal Eurocentrism* that eventually provided the template for “external” Eurocentrism during the colonial age (Hanegraaff 2022b and 2025; cf. discussion of

3 Comparing Practices on a Global Scale

The importance of the CAS-E project, as I see it, lies precisely in the fact that it takes the globalization of esotericism research seriously while smartly avoiding these traps. First of all, most centrally and most obviously, its point of departure does not lie in any Western “esoteric” *discourse* but in a first-hand empirical study of *practices*. Focusing more specifically on practices defined as “esoteric,” of decisive importance is the fact that the resulting composite, referred to as “esoteric practices,” will be employed *exclusively* as an analytical second-order category. This should make it possible for the CAS-E project to avoid any conceptual slippage or confusion between strictly “etic” second-order analytical language in English and the “emic” first-order vocabulary used by practitioners in their own languages. The CAS-E proposal makes it perfectly clear that the “esoteric practices” category is strictly a theoretical construct invented for purposes of comparative analysis, *not* a “historical prototype” of Western provenance or a universal “phenomenon” that must always retain the same “essence.” Precisely the *abstract* theoretical nature of the stipulative working definition is what “makes it possible to investigate esoteric practices from a truly global perspective and disengage from a Eurocentric ‘imperialism of categories.’”

Why call these practices “esoteric”? The great advantage of an abstract second-order category is that (similar, in this respect, to “esotericism” as a mere label of convenience in historical research, see above) its usefulness does not depend in any crucial manner on the *words* that happen to be chosen to give it a name. In principle, the central CAS-E category would work just as well if the adjective “esoteric” were avoided in favour of the more laborious descriptive label “practices related to the prediction of and attempt to control and manipulate contingent life events.” Of crucial importance is the fact that these practices are not being defined or constructed *a priori* as somehow intrinsically “esoteric” (let alone “magical,” to name the elephant in the room that this project wisely avoids)¹⁴ but will be studied empirically, *a posteriori*, without any prior hidden assumptions about what will be encountered on the ground.

philhellenism in Hanegraaff 2022: 360–362). Interestingly, extensive documentation in support of this point has been published very recently in Strube 2024.

14 I would find it advisable to be even more explicit on this point. For instance, the core practices of Hermetic spirituality in Roman Egypt (Hanegraaff 2022: 235–255, 284–307) would not be perceived as “magical” in any traditional sense but perfectly fit the four CAS-E criteria for a working definition of esoteric practices.

Precisely this choice for a consistently bottom-up approach exemplifies the crucial research imperative of “listening to the sources” (that is, in this case, cultivating a constructive and open-ended dialogue between practitioners and scholars)¹⁵ rather than stipulating in advance which kind of language they should speak or what message we expect to hear from them. Such a non-hegemonic commitment to dialogue implies that nothing can ever be written in stone or determined for eternity, including any aspect of the initial working definition, which therefore “may be continually modified during the course of research, in an open exchange of results with research partners and practitioners from multiple cultural environments.” I believe this is exactly the way to go.

While I see no significant weaknesses, the CAS-E project does of course have certain limitations. The restriction to *contemporary* practices is perfectly justified because, contrary to their historical predecessors, these can be observed directly at first hand and commented on by living practitioners. The latter can *show* researchers directly “how it is done,” in a manner that historical sources cannot. Still, I do hope and expect that the results of the CAS-E project will eventually provide us with new hermeneutical and comparative perspectives that could be used in studying “esoteric practices” from earlier historical periods as well. A further limitation is perhaps not really a limitation. Due to its deliberate focus on *contemporary esoteric practices*, the CAS-E project cannot and indeed does not aspire to resolve the current debate about a possible global and historical perspective on *esotericism*. In marked contrast with the oppositional-competitive style and claims to exclusivity or theoretical superiority that significantly weaken the approaches discussed above, the CAS-E project does not conflict in any way with the original historiographical project focused more specifically on Western culture. As far as I can see, the two research agendas are different but perfectly compatible and may be mutually beneficial, thus contributing to a healthy academic climate of theoretical and methodological pluralism. I expect that the CAS-E project will help us move away from an overly exclusive obsession with discourse alone, towards a broader and more inclusive vision that allows more attention to non-discursive dimensions of lived religion and spirituality such as, notably, experiences and practices.

15 See above, note 10.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Mriganka Mukhopadhyay and Bernd-Christian Otto for their valuable feedback on an earlier version.

References

- Ashplant, T.G. and Adrian Wilson (1988). Present-Centred History and the Problem of Historical Knowledge. *The Historical Journal* 31(2): pp. 253–274.
- Asprem, Egil & Julian Strube (2021). Afterword: Outlines of a New Roadmap. In: Asprem and Strube, *New Approaches*, pp. 241–251.
- Asprem, Egil and Julian Strube, eds. (2021), *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*. Brill: Leiden / Boston.
- Bakker, Justine & Aren Roukema (2022). 10 Years of Correspondences; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Esotericism Studies. *Correspondences* 10(2): pp. 235–255.
- Bergunder, Michael (2011). Was ist Religion? Kulturwissenschaftliche Überlegungen zum Gegenstand der Religionswissenschaft. *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 19(1/2): pp. 3–55.
- Bergunder, Michael (2020). Umkämpfte Historisierung: Die Zwillingsgeburt von “Religion” und “Esoterik” in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts und das Programm einer globalen Religionsgeschichte. In: Klaus Hock (ed.), *Wissen um Religion: Erkenntnis – Interesse. Epistemologie und Episteme in Religionswissenschaft und Interkultureller Theologie*. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, pp. 47–131.
- Bianchi, Ugo, ed. (1994). *The Notion of “Religion” in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVI IAHR Congress*. Rome: “L’Erma” di Bretschneider.
- Compagnon, Antoine (2004). *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Curry, Patrick (1989). *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early modern England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cusset, François (2008). *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Engler, Steven and Mark Q. Gardiner (2024). (Re)defining Esotericism: Fluid Definitions, Property Clusters and the Cross-Cultural Debate. *Aries* 24(2): pp. 1–57.
- Favre, Antoine & Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds. (1998). *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion: Selected Papers presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City 1995*. Louvain: Peeters.

- Foucault, Michel (1971). Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire. In: *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 145–172.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (1998). On the Construction of “Esoteric Traditions.” In: Faivre and Hanegraaff (eds.), *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, pp. 11–61.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2005). Esotericism. In: Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. Leiden / Boston: Brill, pp. 336–340.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2012). *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2013). The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse. *Religion* 43(2): pp. 252–273.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2015). The Globalization of Esotericism. *Correspondences* 3, pp. 55–91.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2022a). *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2022b). Esotericism and Democracy: Some Clarifications. *Creative Reading* www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2023). Generous Hermeneutics: Hans Thomas Hakl and Eranos. *Religiographies* 2(1): pp. 59–75.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2024a). The Unnecessity of Definition. *Aries* 24(2): pp. 227–230.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2024b). Hermes, Hermeneutics & the Humanities. *Creative Reading* www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. (2025). *Esotericism in Western Culture: Counter-Normativity and Rejected Knowledge*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. and Mriganka Mukhopadhyay (2023a). Translating Esotericism: Scepticism, Optimism, Agency. *Correspondences* 11(1): pp. 1–30.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. and Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, eds. (2023b). Special Issue “Translating Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 11(1).
- Medin, Douglas and Andrew Ortony (1989). Psychological Essentialism. In: Stella Vosniadou and Andrew Ortony (eds.), *Similarity and Analogical Reasoning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 179–195.
- Mukhopadhyay, Mriganka (2025). The Occult World of Bengalis. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sebelo J. (2018). Metaphysical Empire, Linguicides and Cultural Imperialism. *English Academic Review* 35(2): pp. 96–115.
- Neugebauer-Wölk, Monika (2013). Historische Esoterikforschung, oder: Der lange Weg der Esoterik zur Moderne. In: Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Renko Geffarth and Markus Meumann (ed.), *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*. Berlin/ Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 37–72.

- Okropiridze, Dimitry (2021). Interpretation Reconsidered: The Definitional Progression in the Study of Esotericism as a Case in Point for the Varifocal Theory of Interpretation. In: Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (eds.), *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*. Leiden / Boston: Brill, pp. 217–240.
- Otto, Bernd-Christian (2013). Discourse Theory Trumps Discourse Theory: Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy*. *Religion* 43(2): pp. 231–240.
- Quiano, Anibal (2007). Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality. *Cultural Studies* 21(2/3): pp. 168–178.
- Saif, Liana and Francesco Leoni (2021). Introduction. in: Liana Saif, Francesca Leoni, Matthew Melvin-Koushki and Farouk Yahua (eds.), *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*. Brill: Leiden / Boston, pp. 1–40.
- Strube, Julian (2021a). Towards the Study of Esotericism without the “Western”: Esotericism from the Perspective of Global Religious History. In: Asprem & Strube, *New Approaches*, pp. 45–66.
- Strube, Julian (2021b). The Emergence of “Esoteric” as a Comparative Category: Towards a Decentered Historiography. *Implicit Religion* 24(3/4): pp. 353–383.
- Strube, Julian (2021c). Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89(4): pp. 1180–1189.
- Strube, Julian (2022). *Global Tantra: Religion, Science, and Nationalism in Colonial Modernity*, Oxford University Press.
- Strube, Julian (2023). Religious Comparativism, Esotericism, and the Global Occult: A Methodological Outline. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, pp. 1–24 (pre-print).
- Strube, Julian (2024). Esotericism between Europe and East Asia: How the “Esoteric Distinction” became a Structure in Cross-Cultural Interpretation. *Numen* 71, 9–28 (pre-print).
- Thompson, E.P. (1963). *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Zuber, Mike A. (2021). *Spiritual Alchemy: From Jacob Boehme to Mary Anne Atwood*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.