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Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism

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CHAPTER 10

Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism

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When the American cultural critic Theodore Roszak published his famous book *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), he was trying to understand the new youth movement and the roots of its rebellion against technocratic society. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of unprecedented experimentation with anything that might provide alternatives to dominant American and European culture after World War II, and especially to its underlying values of strict rationality and scientific objectivity combined with a Christian morality of personal discipline and self-denial. Because young people felt alienated from the society that their parents had created, anything that the older generation had rejected as irrational, unscientific, or immoral now became attractive and endlessly fascinating to them: logically enough, it was in such mystical, occult, or esoteric alternatives to mainstream culture that they hoped to find inspiration for “other ways of thinking” and “other ways of living.”

Esotericism can be understood as a general label for all those traditions in Western culture that had been rejected by rationalist and scientific thinkers since the eighteenth century, the period of the Enlightenment, as well as by dominant forms of Protestant Christianity since the sixteenth century, the age of the Reformation (Hanegraaff 2012). It has often been assumed that everything that had ended up in this reservoir of “rejected knowledge” belongs to a single great spiritual tradition, imagined as a kind of traditional Western counterculture parallel to a similar tradition of Oriental esotericism. These Eastern and Western esoteric traditions are then supposed to be grounded ultimately in one and the same ancient and universal wisdom. However, such assumptions have much more to do with the personal perspectives and background agendas of modern and contemporary observers and practitioners than with the reality of how various currents, ideas, or practices nowadays labeled as “esoteric” have actually function(ed) in their own specific time and context. In other words, there is often an enormous difference between the “esotericism” of the popular imagination and the “esotericism” of the social and historical realities that are being studied under that label.

In this chapter, we will try to demonstrate this point by taking a closer look at the five most important theoretical perspectives, or interpretive lenses, through which “esotericism”

has been perceived and studied by modern scholars: religionism, sociology, secrecy, discourse, and history. Please note: it would be a mistake to assume that these are just different ways of looking at one and the same object or field of research, considered as something that somehow already exists “out there,” ready for us to investigate it. On the contrary, each of these theoretical perspectives has its own way of creating or imaginatively constructing “esotericism” as a field of research. We will see that each one has different implications for what is highlighted as important and what is neglected as marginal; indeed, the very questions that we may ask about “esotericism” depend very much on our prior theoretical interests and agendas.

First we will discuss the phenomenon of esoterically oriented perspectives on esotericism, often referred to as *religionism*. Second we will be looking at *sociological* theories that perceive esotericism in terms of social formations and organizations. Third we will consider understandings of esotericism as grounded in *secrecy and concealment*. Fourth we will give attention to *discursive* perspectives focused on the dynamics of power regulation through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Fifth we will ask ourselves how esotericism can be understood from strictly *historical* or even historicist perspectives.

RELIGIONIST PERSPECTIVES

If we take our cue from how esotericism is understood in popular culture today, we are in fact adopting a quite specific theoretical perspective inspired by distinctive spiritual and countercultural agendas. Beginning in the 1960s, the general book market was flooded with titles about various kinds of rejected knowledge, such as magic, astrology, alchemy, Spiritualism, theosophy, Rosicrucianism, tarot, quantum mysticism, holistic healing, witchcraft, or prophecies of the Aquarian Age. All of this was clearly “alternative” to official Christianity, mainstream rationality, and established science—but what did it all mean, and how did it all hang together?

Authoritative answers to such questions were being provided by a wave of bestselling scholars with solid academic credentials, and countless popular authors were inspired by the general drift of their writings. Most influential of all were the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and the historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). The impact of these two authors on American and European popular religion after World War II has been enormous. Even today, their basic theoretical perspectives and background assumptions are still quasi-omnipresent in literature for the general market about topics such as religion, myth, or symbolism (not to mention psychology), as well as about almost every imaginable form of “esotericism.” It is simply impossible for anybody interested in such topics—from academics to the wider public—to avoid regular confrontation with Jungian or Eliadean ways of thinking.

Next to these two towering figures, we find an enormous variety of authors whose basic theoretical assumptions are either derived directly or indirectly from Jung and Eliade, or are very similar to their perspectives, or lend themselves to being interpreted (whether correctly or not) as compatible with broadly Jungian or Eliadean patterns of thought. They range from extremely popular Americans such as the mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) and the psychologist James Hillman (1926–2011), to slightly less famous but still highly profiled French intellectuals such as the Islamicist Henry Corbin (1903–1978) and the anthropologist Gilbert Durand (1921–2012), to a never-ending series of lesser authors standing more or less in the same tradition. Some of the most successful bestselling scholars

in the study of religion (such as Huston Smith [1919–] and Karen Armstrong [1944–]) owe much of their popularity and appeal to the fact that they approach religion from the same basic premises.

We will be referring to this perspective as “religionism.” Before discussing its basic theoretical assumptions, however, this section will review its historical development. Interestingly, the origins of religionism can be determined quite precisely: while its intellectual principles may be traced as far back as the radical Pietism of the seventeenth century (Hanegraaff 2012, 120–127), religionism emerged as a distinctive approach to religion and mythology through a famous series of annual conferences, dedicated to the discussion of humanistic and religious studies, that took place in Switzerland between 1933 and 1988 and that are known as the Eranos meetings (Hakl 2013; Hanegraaff 2012, 277–314). They were organized by a wealthy Dutch woman, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, and convened on the grounds of her estate in Switzerland. Every scholar was expected to contribute to this “banquet” (the meaning of *Eranos* in Greek) of ideas by addressing a chosen annual theme.

Before World War II, the dominant figure at Eranos was Carl Gustav Jung, surrounded by a much larger group of influential scholars such as the indologist Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943), the theologian Friedrich Heiler (1892–1967), the historian of religion Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881–1962), the philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), the Islamicist Louis Massignon (1883–1962), and scholars of mythology such as Walter F. Otto (1874–1958) and Karl Kerényi (1897–1973). After the war, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, Eranos became the favorite meeting place of an extraordinary series of scholarly celebrities: while Mircea Eliade may have become the most influential of all, other notable names are the pioneer of Jewish kabbalah Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the specialist of Islamic mysticism Henry Corbin, the Japanese Zen Buddhist D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), the historian of gnosticism Gilles Quispel (1916–2006), the second-generation Jungian Erich Neumann (1905–1960), the phenomenologist of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), the historian of religion Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959), the historian of Christianity Ernst Benz (1907–1978), the theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), the symbolic anthropologist Gilbert Durand (1921–2012), the psychologist James Hillman (1926–2011), and, last but not least, the pioneer scholar of “Western esotericism” Antoine Faivre (1934–).

Culturally and intellectually, the Eranos perspective was grounded in European and especially German scholarly discourse; but thanks to very generous funding by wealthy individuals and organizations, notably the Bollingen Foundation (McGuire 1982), countless books by Eranos scholars were translated into English and went on to become extremely popular in the United States. This remarkable transition of highbrow European and German scholarship to popular American culture during the 1960s and 1970s must be seen in connection with another crucial nodal point of religionist thinking: the famous Esalen center located at the edge of the Pacific Ocean west of San Francisco (Anderson 2004; Kripal 2007). Founded by Michael Murphy (1930–) and Richard Price (1930–) in the early sixties, Esalen became a favorite meeting place not only for Asian and European spiritual teachers, holistic healers, and therapists but also for intellectuals across the entire spectrum from quantum physics to religious studies.

By and large, the theoretical assumptions typical of Eranos religionism came to dominate Esalen perspectives on religion and spirituality as well, although transformed through the unique countercultural atmosphere of the American West Coast. Finally, with

Mircea Eliade at the University of Chicago as its uncontested center, religionism has been the dominant approach in American religious studies from the 1960s until far into the 1980s. Since then, a strong antireligionist reaction has set in, for reasons that largely have to do with questions of scholarly method and theory: critics insist on a strictly secular approach and argue that the implicit religious or spiritual assumptions of religionism (on which more below) render it unscientific. In addition, the antireligionist reaction also had to do with the discovery of Eliade's early involvement with Romanian fascism: when rumors about his connection to the virulently anti-Semitic organization known as the Iron Guard turned out to be correct, this was a great shock to his many admirers. But in spite of these controversies, religionism remains a strong force in American university approaches to religion.

It has often been noted that although religious or spiritual presuppositions are almost tangibly present in the writings of major religionist scholars, they are almost never spelled out explicitly and are therefore difficult to pin down. However, with the development of historical scholarship in Western esotericism since the 1990s, it has become evident that some of the most basic assumptions of religionist scholarship do have their origin in previously neglected "esoteric" traditions. For instance, Eliade owes some of his most central insights to an important esoteric school known as traditionalism, and more specifically to René Guénon (1886–1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), and Julius Evola (1898–1974) (Pisi 1998; compare Hanegraaff 2012, 306–307). As for Jung, his intellectual roots are in the late nineteenth-century study of Spiritualism and other "occult phenomena," which he approached from a perspective heavily indebted to German Romantic Mesmerism and its further roots in forms of German esotericism such as Paracelsianism and Christian Theosophy. These are all important traditions in the field of European and American esotericism. After his break with Freud, followed by a deep spiritual crisis, Jung constructed his mature psychological theories on foundations derived from his personal understanding of ancient mystery religions, gnosticism, alchemy, astrology, Mesmerism, and Spiritualism. Similar influences can be demonstrated for many other key representatives of Eranos religionism, as well as for their later Esalen continuations.

In sum, religionism is an extremely influential perspective on religion and mythology that is deeply indebted to Western esoteric traditions, although its representatives, such as Jung and Eliade, often tried to conceal that fact. They usually did so by using an "objective" scholarly language while suppressing any explicit references to their personal esoteric beliefs or background assumptions. What all manifestations of religionism have in common is the paradoxical combination of (on the one hand) an explicit claim of writing history of religions and (on the other) a consistent wish to go beyond history. By presenting themselves as "historians of religion," these scholars are suggesting an objective approach to their research, grounded in the unbiased study of empirical sources. However, their ways of interpreting those sources are marked by consistent attempts to go beyond history to find some universal spiritual meaning or truth that cannot be threatened by the relativizing forces of historical contingency and change. In short, typical of religionism is the wish to find a spiritual truth that will remain valid forever, regardless of time and circumstances. This universal reality of the sacred (in Eliade's terminology), or of universal archetypes in the collective unconscious (in Jungian language), functions as a spiritual haven of refuge from what Eliade called the "terror of history." The message is that, whatever may happen in the world outside, there are inner spiritual truths (in traditional terms: "the good, the beautiful, and the true") that do not change but remain valid forever.

It is therefore evident that religionism as a theoretical perspective is inspired not just by scholarly agendas but also by a search for spiritual meaning. It results in interpretations of religion that are themselves religious. The religiosity in question is clearly a response to the threatening forces of historical relativism, materialist science, and strict rationality. Against those dominant trends of Western modernity, religionism insists that not everything is relative, that there is a spiritual dimension invisible to the materialist gaze, and that there are things between heaven and earth that reason just does not understand. The famous “disenchantment of the world” since the eighteenth century (based on the premise, formulated by the sociologist Max Weber [1864–1920], that “there are no mysterious, incalculable forces” in the world) is perceived as an extremely serious problem because it erodes and undermines the very foundations of morality (Asprem 2014, 15–89). If all is relative, then by definition there are no universal values; without some spiritual dimension we are left with nothing but a brutal fight for the survival of the fittest; and if pure reason is the ultimate arbiter of human action, then why indeed should we promote anything else?

From a religionist perspective, esotericism stands for the deeper or inner spiritual dimension of reality that religion is or should be all about. As such, it is contrasted with the shallow and merely external (exoteric) perspectives of religious dogmatism and rationalist science. Esotericism is not just seen as an object of research but also as an object of personal commitment. The assumption is that without such commitment to the sacred and to deeper spiritual values, scholars will fail to understand what “true” religion is really all about: even those who claim to be studying esotericism are then really doing little more than scratching the exoteric surface of mere historical facts while remaining oblivious to what is actually esoteric about them.

Although this religionist argument might strike many readers as quite convincing at first sight, it has some implications that are quite problematic. We will see that it is precisely from historical approaches that the most convincing critiques of religionism have come. First, however, three different perspectives will be discussed that are all to some extent concerned with the social rather than the individual dimension of “esotericism.”

ESOTERICISM IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

If religionist scholars are studying esotericism—or, more precisely, what *they* consider to be “esotericism”—they do so ultimately for spiritual reasons. By contrast, scholars who are working from a social-scientific perspective are trying to understand and explain the social formations and dynamics that result from the search for spiritual values in modern society. Sociological approaches to esotericism emerged during the 1960s and 1970s in the broader context of what is known as the “secularization paradigm,” and this happened essentially because academics were taken unawares by the sudden and unexpected emergence of countless new religious movements and a new popular fascination with what was usually referred to as “the occult.” According to the secularization paradigm, this was not supposed to happen. Social scientists had been working under the assumption that rationalization and scientific progress would inevitably lead to a gradual and irreversible decline or marginalization of religion as a significant factor in society. If religion would survive at all, it would only be able to do so by retreating politely into the private sphere.

So what to think, then, of the sudden exuberant explosion of new religious movements and alternative forms of spirituality since the 1960s? One popular academic strategy was to

deny that all of this was “religion” at all. The extremely influential work of the sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) was based on the premise that religion functions to maintain social cohesion and typically assumes the form of a “church” (Durkheim 1995). However, all this new spiritual activity rather seemed to be disruptive of traditional social structures, and its fascination with “the occult” might seem to suggest that all of this was not religion but “magic”—a category that, according to Durkheim, stood for the nonsocial or even antisocial perspective of private practitioners offering their services to individual customers. It was easy enough to perceive the new wave of popular astrologers, tarot readers, and other occultist entrepreneurs as magical practitioners in this sense, operating in the margins of society and of “true” religion. Clearly, the rampant individualism of the new spiritual movements just did not sit very well with a perspective that saw religion as the cement of social cohesion.

The chief problem with these sociological approaches was their deep indebtedness to traditional perspectives that looked at Christianity as the model example of “religion” and (whether implicitly or explicitly) adopted Christian understandings of “magic” or “the occult” as an obviously inferior phenomenon that barely deserved to be called religion at all. One can also see this in the difficulties sociologists had in coming to terms with the many “churchlike” new religious movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In Durkheimian terms, it was hard to deny that controversial movements such as the Unification Church (famous for its mass weddings in football stadiums) or the Church of Scientology did indeed function like churches that were doing precisely what religion was supposed to be doing: creating social cohesion for their members.

The most popular response to this difficulty was to deny such organizations the status of “religions” by categorizing them as inherently problematic “sects” or “cults” instead. Again, this perspective was grounded in Christianity as the model example of what a religion was supposed to be all about: just as gnostic and other “heretical” movements had been denied the status of true religion by Christian theologians, who had dismissed them as problematic sectarian movements that were disrupting the unity of the true religion, likewise these new religious movements could be described as dangerous pseudoreligions that were tearing up the fabric of society.

A further theoretical perspective that became popular in the 1960s and 1970s was a “sociology of the occult” that focused on the concept of deviance (Tiryakian 1974; Truzzi 1974; compare Hanegraaff 1998, 40–42; Granholm 2015, 720–722). Its representatives emphasized the oppositional or countercultural attitudes of occultism to such an extent that they ended up describing it as nothing but an adolescent reaction against the normative grown-up values of modernity. This is a particularly clear example of how a specific theoretical perspective is able to completely dominate the perception of realities “out there”: as formulated by the British sociologist James Beckford (1942–), “it is as if these movements simply flew into a very sticky spider’s web of concepts and assumptions which immediately reduced their significance to an expression of alienation, anomie, relative deprivation or ‘the flight from reason’” (1984, 260).

While the countercultural nature of the occult in the 1960s and 1970s is hard to deny, the problematic hidden assumption was that such esoteric beliefs and practices hardly needed to be taken seriously and studied in their own right. Their representatives just needed to grow up. What made them relevant for sociologists was merely the fact that they were deviating from the norm. This approach took for granted the normative assumptions

of mainstream society: instrumental rationality, the authority of science, traditional morality, and so on.

A major problem for sociologists concerned the practicalities of research. Whereas some esoteric movements (often called “sects”) were collectivist, stable, tightly structured, and clearly circumscribed, many others (often called “cults”) were individualist, fluid and unstable, loosely organized, and with vague and blurry boundaries. As such, they tended to fall apart or morph into something else before sociologists even had a chance to study them properly. In a seminal article published in 1972, the sociologist Colin Campbell (1940–) therefore proposed a different perspective by focusing on what he called “the cultic milieu”:

Given that cultic groups have a tendency to be ephemeral and highly unstable, it is a fact that new ones are being born just as fast as the old ones die. There is a continual process of cult formation and collapse which parallels the high turnover of membership at the individual level. Clearly, therefore, cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general (1972, 121–122).

While specific cults come and go, Campbell concluded, this cultic milieu is a constant feature of society. It could be defined in terms of its position of heterodoxy and deviancy in relation to established cultural orthodoxies.

One beneficial implication of this notion of a cultic milieu was that its relative stability and continuity allowed it to be studied not just from a sociological but also from a historical perspective. Rather than seeing occult beliefs and practices as mere impulsive gestures of rebellion against the status quo (very much like children or adolescents rebelling against their parents), scholars could now see them as parts of an important historical phenomenon that deserved serious attention: the emergence in modern society of diffuse countercultural networks grounded in a consistent rejection of traditional religious and scientific beliefs and assumptions.

In more recent sociological work, the notion of a cultic milieu has been developed into new directions, culminating in the scholar Christopher Partridge’s (1961–) concept of *occulture*. Turning the tables on traditional sociological assumptions about normative culture and its oppositional or deviant counterpart, Partridge suggests that the strict rationality and scientific rigor supposedly typical of the cultural mainstream is a relatively recent and restricted phenomenon supported mainly by intellectual elites, whereas occulture reflects extremely popular and widespread attitudes and assumptions that are “more ubiquitous, ordinary, and less oppositional” than one tends to realize. Historically, he claims, they are “a feature of all societies” (Partridge 2013, 119). In short, occulture is “ordinary and everyday” (Partridge 2013, 119). One might even go so far as to conclude that if anything is really deviant from such a broader perspective, it is precisely the historically unique, relatively recent tradition of Enlightenment rationality and its radical *rejection* of occulture! (Hanegraaff 2015).

ESOTERICISM AS SECRECY AND CONCEALMENT

The etymology of the adjective *esoteric* and the noun *esotericism* suggests that these terms have to do with the “inner” side of things. As such, esoteric realities are those that remain secret or concealed from the eyes of the multitudes but may be revealed to the initiate. The

adjective first appeared in the second century, with the poet Lucian of Samosata (c. 125–180 CE), who seems to have understood the esoteric as something “seen from within,” whereas the exoteric is something seen from outside (Hanegraaff 2005a, 336). The church father Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215 CE) was the first to draw a connection with secrecy and concealment: “the disciples of Aristotle say that some of their treatises are esoteric, and others common and exoteric. Further, those who instituted the mysteries, being philosophers, buried their doctrines in myths, so as not to be obvious to all” (Clement, *Stromata* V, 58, 3–4). The idea of “esoteric” teachings reserved for a mystical elite was taken up by later authors and has remained very common until the present day.

The term *esoterica* (nowadays popular as referring to “all things esoteric,” whatever that might mean) goes back to the same passage by Clement (Riffard 1990, 71; Neugebauer-Wölk 2013, 66–67), but the noun *esotericism* is much more recent. It first appeared as the German *Esoterismus* in 1779, in a book by the important counter-Enlightenment thinker Johann Georg Hamann (Neugebauer-Wölk 2013, 51). For Hamann, too, it was connected directly to the ancient mysteries—in fact, even the strange title of Hamann’s book, *Konxompax*, has its origins in a treatise from the fifth or sixth century about the Mysteries of Eleusis (Pasi 2007, 225). From this time on, one sees a gradual spread of similar nouns in German (*Esoterik*, 1792), French (*l’ésotérisme*, 1828) and English (*esotericism*, 1883; for all the details, see Neugebauer-Wölk 2010; 2013).

It was only natural that this originally Greek terminology would become associated with various words based on the Latin *occultus* (hidden), as in “occult philosophy,” the “occult sciences,” “occultism,” or simply “the occult” (Hanegraaff 2005b; 2013a). Whereas terms such as *esoteric* and *esotericism* were originally connected to the idea of initiation into sacred *spiritual* mysteries, the term *occult* referred rather to hidden, invisible forces that were active in the *natural* world and could be discovered by science. As self-described “occultists” during the nineteenth century tried to create a new synthesis of science and religion, claiming that all the hidden secrets of nature were already known to the initiates of ancient mystery traditions, it was only logical that the terms *esoteric(ism)* and *occult(ism)* would come to be used more or less interchangeably.

If important dimensions of reality are hidden, concealed, or secret, the implication is that they might be revealed, disclosed, and brought to light by those who have the keys to true knowledge. This idea that there are deep mysteries waiting to be discovered is obviously attractive and endlessly fascinating, as anybody can see from the enormous popularity of books or films about secret societies, secret traditions, and hidden conspiracies, with Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) and Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* (2003) as just two of the most famous examples, not to mention endless speculations online or offline about movements of “Illuminati” active behind the scenes of world politics.

These understandings of esotericism go back to the seventeenth century, with the myth of a secret Rosicrucian Brotherhood created by a famous text of 1614, the *Fama Fraternitatis*. In the context of Freemasonry from the eighteenth century on, we see the emergence of an endless series of historical fantasies about mysterious secret orders active in the ancient world and perhaps going back to the very creation of the world (Hanegraaff 2012, 207–218). According to the most common way of imagining these traditions, the ancient wisdom was first handed down through Pythagorean brotherhoods, then taken up by the mysterious movement of the Essenes (mentioned by ancient writers such as Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus), from where they were passed on through the Order of the Knights Templar. Although the Templars were violently crushed by the authorities in 1307,

it was believed that surviving members had managed to preserve their secrets and bring them to Scotland, the homeland of Freemasonry. Beginning with a famous book published in 1798–1799 by a conservative Catholic, the Abbé Barruel, the “secrets of Freemasonry” have inspired an enormous and ongoing production of conspiracy theories.

Speculations about secret traditions and conspiracies have always flourished in countercultural milieus, for obvious reasons. They suggest that the reigning ideologies and political powers have a vested interest in discrediting and suppressing any tradition that challenges their attempts to dominate the world by controlling information and manipulating the hearts and minds of the people at large. Secret traditions are a threat to the “powers that be,” because as long as they remain undetected, they can subvert the status quo by telling a different story grounded in different values. The more sinister counterpart to this logic consists in the idea that the political or economic powers that dominate our world are themselves controlled by secret societies with sinister goals of power and domination.

The result is a starkly Manichaean perspective in which the forces of light and the forces of darkness are engaged in a secret battle behind the scenes. The assumption is that the forces of good are trying to wake us up and illuminate us to true knowledge about our situation in the world, whereas their opponents have a vested interest in keeping us ignorant. Such ideas are extremely popular in occultist conspiracy theories online and offline, for instance about a sinister organization that calls itself the “Illuminati” and tries to impose a “New World Order,” but also in bestselling novels such as those by Umberto Eco or Dan Brown (already mentioned), comics such as Alan Moore’s *Promethea*, or movies such as *The Matrix*.

The sociology of secrecy originated in a pioneering article by the German scholar Georg Simmel (1858–1918), “The Sociology of Secrecy and the Secret Society” (1906), that was strongly influenced by his personal experiences with the secret cult of countercultural artists and intellectuals around the poet Stefan George (1868–1933). Simmel realized that the notion of secrecy is essential to the social regulation, distribution, and manipulation of information and knowledge; and in the terms of another influential theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), secrecy functions as “social capital” that lends power to those who are in a position to reveal or withhold it.

From such a perspective, it is easy to conclude that all forms of esotericism are grounded in social processes of knowledge control. To give one example, the Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934)—one of the most important influences on popular esotericism since the nineteenth century—claimed to have perfect clairvoyant powers that allowed him to give meticulous descriptions of anyone’s previous incarnations through literally millions of years. Because Theosophists were endlessly curious to learn from him what roles they might have played in historical events during their past lives, and Leadbeater had the monopoly on that knowledge, this gave him enormous power in the Theosophical milieu (Tillett 1982, 114–122).

The case of secrecy may serve to illustrate a point that was made earlier, namely that every theoretical perspective has its own way of creating or imaginatively constructing “esotericism” as a field of research. If we assume that the term *esotericism* refers to a specific series of historically related currents from antiquity to the present, then we have to conclude that although secrecy and concealment do play an important role in many of them, they are marginal or absent in many others. This means that secrecy and concealment cannot be used as a criterion for defining or demarcating the field as a whole.

Reversely, if one simply stipulates that in order for something to qualify as “esotericism,” it must be concerned with secrecy or concealment, the boundaries of the field will be drawn in a different way. In that case one will be forced to *exclude* large parts of the historical domain just mentioned while *including* a wide range of different materials that are otherwise never associated with esotericism or the occult. For instance, the American scholar Hugh Urban has written a fascinating book about the role of secrecy in the George W. Bush administration (Urban 2007), but one would hardly call Bush an esotericist. Indeed, since the regulation of secrets is a universal phenomenon in all kinds of religion worldwide, even such virulently anti-esoteric and anti-occult contexts as Christian evangelicalism, or various initiatic traditions in Africa or Asia, would have to be studied under the rubric of “esotericism.” Therefore, one should be cautious not to speak too casually about the relation between “esotericism,” on the one hand, and “secrecy and concealment,” on the other. Historically there is a large overlap between the two domains, but they cannot be treated as identical, and they imply different research agendas.

ESOTERIC DISCOURSE

As already discussed, during the 1960s and 1970s sociologists tended to perceive esotericism and the occult as “deviant” phenomena that were rebelling against the established norms of modern society. Those norms themselves were not called into question. However, the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) began undermining such a perspective by focusing on the “discursive” processes (referring to his notion of “discourse,” see below) through which *any* society presents its own dominant perspectives as normal, healthy, and sane while ostracizing, discrediting, marginalizing, or even criminalizing dissident perspectives as abnormal, unhealthy, and insane. The essence of discursive approaches has been perfectly formulated by Olav Hammer:

Using the term discourse draws attention to the mechanisms of ideology and power that include and accept certain voices, while at the same time excluding others. It implies that certain propositions regarding the human condition and the constitution of reality, which are historically contingent and culturally constructed, are presented within the discourse as if they were natural, trans-historical facts and thus protected from scrutiny. The limits of discourse also define the boundaries of what may tolerably be questioned. (Hammer 2001, 29)

Foucault’s most famous analyses were focused on the regulation of madness and sexuality; but one cannot help speculating that if he had not prematurely died of AIDS in 1984, he might well have written another book about the discursive construction of “rejected knowledge” by Enlightenment discourse.

Discourse analysis has become important to the modern study of esotericism because, due to its focus on the dynamics of power in historical processes of identity formation, it can serve as a bridge between social-scientific and historical perspectives (see, for instance, Granholm 2014). Many scholars today are using discursive approaches within a broader framework of intellectual history (for instance, Hammer 2001; Otto 2011; Hanegraaff 2012), whereas others insist that discourse analysis should be the very foundation for historical research, which means that the emphasis is shifted from historical toward social processes (for instance, von Stuckrad 2010).

Again, it is important to understand that such an approach has far-reaching implications for how the very notion of esotericism is constructed and understood. This

can be illustrated with particular clarity at the example of von Stuckrad's work. He rejects the very term *esotericism* in favor of *esoteric discourse*, which is understood, along the lines of Simmel and Bourdieu, as "a secretive dialectic of concealment and revelation which is concerned with perfect knowledge" (von Stuckrad 2010, 67). This means that esoteric discourse is not understood as a historical object of scholarly analysis in its own right but as an instrument for analyzing the general dynamics of religious pluralism in the history of European culture. In other words, this research agenda is concerned with analyzing general discursive processes of identity formation by means of exclusion, marginalization, or "othering," rather than with analyzing those specific historical currents or ideas that have been excluded, marginalized, or "othered" (Hanegraaff 2012, 365). Logically, this means that one is no longer dealing with a study of Western esotericism in any strict sense, but with a specific discursive approach to the study of religion in general.

HISTORICAL APPROACHES

We have been looking at one theoretical perspective (religionism) that is itself grounded in esoteric beliefs or assumptions, followed by three different perspectives that all share an emphasis on the analysis of social dynamics. Since the 1980s, the general theoretical debate (especially in the United States) about how to study religion has been largely polarized between these two alternatives: scholars were supposed to be either religionist "believers" or else social reductionist "critics" of religion. However, it is far from clear why one should be forced into such a rigid either/or choice, for there is a middle ground (Hanegraaff 1995). If we look at religion from a strictly *historical* perspective, then our concern is simply with the empirical presence in time and space of various currents, practices, or ideas that (for reasons that are themselves historical!) have been commonly categorized as "religious." If we zoom in more specifically on the study of "esotericism," then the situation can still be described in exactly the same terms.

This does not mean that those categories ("religion" or "esotericism") are innocent or unproblematic. On the contrary, they are discursive constructs loaded with ideological implications, and as such, they subtly induce us to perceive the phenomena in question in certain ways rather than in others. As a result, categories such as "religion" or "esotericism" cannot be properly understood or used safely unless we are acutely aware of the social and political agendas that they have been made to serve.

Nevertheless, no matter how contested these general categories may be, and no matter how hotly scholars may debate their nature and boundaries, it remains true that the various historical currents, ideas, and practices to which they are applied *are simply there*. To study them in depth, one does not need to have an opinion about whether they should be categorized as "religious" or "esoteric" or not (or, for that matter, about whether their beliefs are right or wrong, whether their presence in society is a good or a bad thing, and so on). For instance, the history of modern Theosophy does not change one bit because scholars since the 1990s have decided to discuss it under a rubric that they are now referring to as "esotericism." It could be studied quite as adequately under some different kind of rubric, for the documented evidence would still be the same.

This is true not just for historical *currents* such as modern Theosophy, Paracelsian alchemy, Renaissance Platonism, and so on. It is also true for patterns of *ideas* such as the recurring idea that there is an ancient tradition of true wisdom coming from the East, or

that nature is permeated by an invisible divine presence, or that a secret society of Illuminati is controlling the world, and so on. Finally, it is true of *practices* such as initiation into a secret society, or inducing altered states of consciousness to gain access to higher knowledge or gnosis, or invoking demons or deities, and so on. All these things are there, empirically available for us in the sources that we are studying (or, in the case of contemporary esotericism, in beliefs and practices that can be studied at first hand, for instance by participant observation). They do not change because scholars call them esoteric or decide to give them some other name.

“Esotericism” as a scholarly category therefore does not have any intrinsic historical referent (compare Bergunder 2010): nothing requires one to assume that there *really* exists an “esoteric tradition” out there that historians are trying to recover. Instead, the category is understood as a pragmatic scholarly construct. This implies a consistently nominalist perspective: “esotericism” is ultimately just a name that scholars have decided to use for the purpose of placing certain historical currents, ideas, and practices apart for special investigation.

To some readers, this may sound as if the formation of such a category is wholly arbitrary and superfluous, but such a conclusion would be incorrect. In the case of “esotericism,” it became established in scholarly research since the 1990s because scholars had come to realize that a large number of important historical currents, ideas, and practices were being marginalized in academic discourse, resulting in seriously flawed perceptions of Western cultural and religious history. This situation needed to be corrected, and “esotericism” came to be used as a general label for all these forms of rejected knowledge. It remains extremely useful to have scholarly networks, journals, conferences, and study programs in which “esotericism” is pragmatically set apart as a field of research. That there is no natural or intrinsic correspondence between the signifier (“esotericism”) and the signified (historical phenomena *x*, *y*, *z*) in no way diminishes the usefulness of the former.

Taken to its logical conclusions, nominalism here implies a perspective of radical historicism with profoundly relativist implications. It means that scholars, by bestowing names on realities, are imaginatively ordering and categorizing the world, telling stories about it to make sense of the data. Such narratives are useful and necessary, but one should never forget that they are creative reconstructions that necessarily filter the data according to our own scripts. In and by themselves, historical events are infinitely complex and can be approached from an endless number of different angles: for instance, a key figure in modern esotericism such as Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) was not just an esotericist or occultist, but also a poet, a mountain climber, a drug addict, a womanizer, and many other things besides. In short, apart from any esoteric labeling, he was simply a human being like everyone else, and no amount of theorizing or empirical description will ever succeed in catching the unique empirical complexity of this or any other personality being studied under the rubric of esotericism.

It is often assumed that the basic theoretical opposition in the study of esotericism is between religionist approaches, with their esoteric background agendas, and reductionist approaches based on social-scientific assumptions. However, the deeper conflict is between religionism and historicism. To give one example, in a general overview, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke presented “the esoteric worldview” as “an enduring tradition which, though subject to some degree of social legitimacy and cultural coloration, actually reflects an autonomous and essential aspect of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos” (2008, 13). It is claimed that to understand it properly, one needs “a hermeneutic

interpretation of spirit and spirituality as an independent ontological reality” (2008, 12). This is a perfect example of the basic religionist logic. It means that esotericism is assumed to be one single thing: “it” is supposed to have remained intact from century to century regardless of historical context, and to be always the same regardless even of external transformations as extreme as secularization, modernization, or the disenchantment of the world.

As this example shows, religionism assigns only secondary importance to precisely those kinds of questions that are most central to the work of historians, such as how or why specific currents, ideas, or practices that we nowadays categorize as “esotericism” have *emerged* as new formations out of specific historical factors and backgrounds, or how they have *developed* or were *transformed* under ever-changing historical and social contexts and circumstances. Instead of focusing on creativity and innovation, religionism seeks to demonstrate the enduring *presence*, regardless of context, of one and the same universal worldview or spiritual reality (compare Hanegraaff 2013c). Of course, this has deeply conservative implications: whenever current *x* or personality *y* deviates too much from what esotericism is supposed to be really all about, it must be regarded as “not truly esoteric” anymore.

In sharp contrast, a historicist perspective does not start from any presumed metaphysical reality “up there” but from the enormous variety of historical sources and observable realities that are empirically present in the world “down here.” Because its focus is on the unique and specific, its interest lies with studying processes of transformation and creative innovation in continuous historical and social flux. Inevitably, this means that there can be no such thing as “esotericism” in the abstract, only an enormous variety of currents, ideas, and practices that can profitably be studied under that rubric—although they might be studied under other rubrics as well.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have been looking at the five most important theoretical perspectives that are operative in the modern study of esotericism: religionism, sociology, the study of secrecy and concealment, discursive approaches, and historicism. Of course, such neat categorizations are always a simplification: in actual practice, we find that scholars often combine several approaches in their work, and it must be said that there is quite some confusion about the exact nature of these theoretical perspectives, their implications, and their relations to one another. Nevertheless, by being clear about the differences between these five approaches to what “esotericism” is all about, we can learn to perceive the theoretical agendas and background assumptions that are operative in the scholarly literature, and this will help us understand why different scholars make different choices.

Against the background just sketched, the modern study of Western esotericism can be described as having gone through three stages (Hanegraaff 2013c). The first, from the 1970s to 1992, might be called “Esotericism 1.0” and was dominated by a religionist paradigm. Starting with a pioneering introductory textbook published in 1992 by the dominant scholar of this period, Antoine Faivre, the field moved to a second stage that might be called “Esotericism 2.0.” This stage was marked by a move away from religionism in favor of empirical, historical, and discursive approaches. In this period the study of esotericism established itself as a new field of academic research, as shown by the emergence of academic

programs, scholarly societies, peer-reviewed journals, an explosion of books and collective volumes, and so on.

Roughly since 2012, the field seems to be moving toward a third stage of development, “Esotericism 3.0,” marked by increasing interdisciplinary debate across the boundaries of the humanities and the social sciences, particularly about how the boundaries of “esotericism” should be drawn. For instance, how should one think about the relation between esotericism and neighboring fields, notably “gnosticism” and “mysticism”? How should one understand “Western” esotericism in view of its spread to Oriental cultures and other parts of the world, or in view of structural parallels in other cultural contexts? What happens to our understandings of “esotericism” when one crosses the boundary from religious studies to other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, or even such disciplines as cognitive science or evolutionary biology? And if the focus is on esoteric discourses in religion generally, then is it necessary to keep setting the field apart at all, or shouldn’t we rather allow it to dissolve into the general study of religion? Scholars have different opinions about each of these questions, and of course I have my own opinion as well (see e.g. Hanegraaff 2013b; 2015). The field referred to as “esotericism” can be constructed and understood in different ways by different scholars, according to each person’s theoretical assumptions and background agendas.

Regardless of the perspective one chooses, esotericism research is certainly among the most exciting new developments in the study of religion and culture today. In less than two decades the field has overcome its previous status as a somewhat marginal pursuit surrounded by academic prejudice and has become a burgeoning and widely respected area of research that is not limited to religion alone but reaches across the boundaries between all disciplines of the humanities (Hanegraaff 2013d). Solid scholars in this field no longer need to be afraid of being ostracized by their colleagues; on the contrary, they will be welcomed for having something new and important to offer. Precisely because the source materials of esotericism have been neglected for so long, there are few other domains where so many discoveries can still be made, often with implications that challenge traditional opinions about what Western culture is all about. In sum, the study of esotericism is not for the timid-minded but for those who wish to boldly go where no one has gone before.

Summary

Esotericism is not a tradition that simply exists “out there” waiting to be studied. Rather, it is actively constructed or created as a field of research, and this happens because scholars are interested in answering specific questions about the development of Western culture past and present. In the most general sense, the modern study of “Western esotericism” (stage 2.0) emerged since the 1990s because scholars began to realize that large domains of thought and practice had been neglected and marginalized by academic research, resulting in widespread ignorance and misunderstandings about what are actually very important dimensions of Western culture. Historically, this process of exclusion and rejection began during the period of the Enlightenment, and hence the modern study of esotericism is concerned with correcting the prejudices and blind spots created by Enlightenment discourse concerning everything that used to be seen as mere “magical superstition,” “occult nonsense,” “primitive prejudice,” “irrational beliefs,” “vague spirituality,” and so on. The modern study of esotericism rests on the conviction that scholarly knowledge should not be

based upon such normative and ideologically biased valuations but on serious and unprejudiced investigation of the currents, ideas, or practices in question.

But what, if anything, do they all have in common? In this regard, different scholars tend to be guided by different ideas and assumptions, as well as by different research traditions and academic (or nonacademic) interests. In this chapter, the most important theoretical perspectives have been presented as ranging from the polar opposites of religionism and historicism, with three approaches in the middle that share a special interest in social dynamics. *Religionism* means that scholars are guided by assumptions that are ultimately grounded not in scholarly methods but in personal beliefs, experiences, hopes, or aspirations about the existence of an ultimate spiritual reality that remains forever true and valid regardless of historical change. By contrast, *historicism* means that one makes no assumptions at all about the existence or nonexistence of an ultimate spiritual reality, but simply concentrates on what one can know for certain: its focus is on the unquestionable empirical presence, in time and space, of a whole range of currents, practices, and ideas that (for historical and ideological reasons that might well be questioned) have been categorized and set apart by labels such as “esotericism,” “the occult,” and so on. The study of esotericism then consists in studying all these materials in depth and trying to reintegrate them into the wider narratives about Western and even global culture. Far from trying to preserve a marginal status of “esotericism,” as is sometimes assumed, such a historicist perspective therefore aims at changing the general discourse of the humanities by correcting its traditional blind spots and questioning some of its basic assumptions. Such a paradigm change has far-reaching implications not only for the study of religion, but also for other disciplines such as philosophy, history of science, and the study of the arts (Hanegraaff 2013d, 143–156).

Between the two theoretical poles, we find a range of theoretical perspectives that are more concerned with general social dynamics than with historical specificity. *Sociological* approaches range from a “sociology of the occult” that reflects traditional narratives of secularization and modernization to a sociology of “occulture” that calls those very narratives into question. A different perspective looks at esotericism as grounded in *secrecy and concealment*, and therefore concentrates on the social dynamics between those who claim to be in possession of “higher” or “absolute” knowledge and those who would like to gain access to it. Finally, theories of *esoteric discourse* are interested in the general discursive mechanisms of power that operate in the broader context of religious pluralism.

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