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The Beginning of the Study of Esotericism in the Academy

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CHAPTER 9

Esotericism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Esotericism in the Academy

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Before discussing the origins and early development of the academic study of esotericism, it is important to consider the status of esotericism as an object of scholarly inquiry, since failure to address this question now could produce misunderstandings later on. The use of the term *esotericism* in various scholarly contexts may lead one to think that the same subject is always being talked about, but it doesn't take long before one realizes that different meanings are attached to the term.

TWO CONCEPTS

This lack of consistency has marred the scholarly study of esotericism since its beginnings. Esotericism has been understood mainly in two ways. In the first case, it is seen as a historical phenomenon that is based on currents and texts that are supposed to be interrelated through influence or transmission. This phenomenon originated in a particular cultural context, and its development can be followed and understood from a historical perspective.

The second one understands esotericism as an aspect of human behavior that did not originate at a particular point in history but can be found in different cultures in all ages and places. Usually, esotericism in this sense is linked with broad concepts such as secrecy or initiation. It is then often understood as a religious phenomenon based on the idea of a “reserved knowledge” that is not supposed to be accessible to all members of a community but is reserved for a particular elite. The ideas and practices associated with it do not appear to belong to a particular culture and can be found in some form in various contexts. It can therefore have a very broad application.

In scholarly literature, the concept of a reserved knowledge has been mostly applied to the study of religion, but it has also been significant for fields such as philosophy and political science. In the context of religion, it has been applied, for example, to Indian Tantra (Urban 2001), Japanese Buddhism (Yamasaki 1988), and early Christianity

(Stroumsa 1996). It has also been applied to some textual traditions of philosophy and political thought. German American philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973) based much of his historiographical research on the idea of a secretive or reserved style of writing in the history of Western philosophy (e.g., Strauss 1952). The political and secular dimension of knowledge is more significant here than the mystical or spiritual one. In all these examples, the rationale for using the term *esotericism* is that these traditions, whether religious or not, have made a distinction between forms of knowledge that are available to an entire community and forms of knowledge that are reserved for or only accessible to an elite.

Although these two meanings have sometimes merged, and continue to do so with some scholars, they belong to different conceptual frameworks in academic discourse. When one talks about esotericism, what is one talking about: a historical phenomenon that took shape in a particular region of the world at a particular time, or an aspect of human culture, such as the way of organizing religious rituals or of conceptualizing religious knowledge with strategies of secrecy, which could potentially be found anywhere?

Most scholars in this field have understood the term *esotericism* in a historical sense. The term has usually been associated with the concept of “Western,” as in “Western esotericism.” Although most scholars would probably admit that such a qualification is problematic (What are the cultural, geographical, and chronological boundaries of “the West”? How does one avoid any danger of gross generalization, which seems inescapable with such a broad, ill-defined concept? Does the use of the term imply an opposition with another ill-defined, problematic term such as “the East?”), the basic rationale for using it lies in the decision to consider esotericism as a phenomenon that fully belongs to history and can therefore be located in a specific historical context (Pasi 2010, 151–155). For this reason, some specialists of Western esotericism resist seeing it as something universal that can be found in any human culture, even if this is how those interested in esotericism have often conceptualized it.

WHEN DOES IT BEGIN?

If esotericism is a phenomenon that is determined by a particular historical context, when did it begin? In antiquity? With the ancient mystery cults? With gnosticism? With Hermeticism and Neoplatonism? Or maybe much later, in the early modern period, when these ancient religious and philosophical traditions began to be rediscovered and appreciated again? The answer to this question presupposes different ways in which esotericism is conceptualized and understood, even as a historical problem, and the opinions of scholars have differed on this point. No attempt to solve it will be made here, and no consensus yet exists on how to solve it. Some scholars prefer to see Western esotericism as beginning in antiquity, whereas others prefer to see it as beginning in the early modern period.

Another issue is that *esotericism* as a term is a relatively recent invention, not older than the late eighteenth century. Does this mean that, if the term is so recent, the phenomenon designated with it must also be recent, and it would be anachronistic to speak of esotericism before the late eighteenth century? How can something exist before the word that is being used for it? The fact is that, from a historical point of view, sometimes things do exist before words. This is the difference between an “emic” and an “etic” level of description, emic being here the way in which practitioners describe themselves and their beliefs or practices, while etic is the way in which scholars conceptualize the same practices and beliefs from their own critical perspective. From an etic perspective—in the study of religion as well as in other scholarly disciplines—a term can be used to designate phenomena that the persons

involved in such phenomena did not use or would have used differently. Provided that the etic meaning of the term is clearly defined or explained by the scholars using it, no confusion should be made between the history of the term (which properly belongs to etymology) and the history of the phenomenon the term describes. In other words, even if the word *esotericism* is not older than the eighteenth century, most scholars agree that, as an etic term, it can be conveniently used to describe a historical phenomenon that took shape in earlier historical periods. One should also keep in mind that, if the noun *esotericism* is relatively recent, the adjective *esoteric*, from which the former was derived, is much more ancient and goes back to late antiquity.

THE FOREST AND THE TREES

We should also note that there is a difference between studying Western esotericism as a complex phenomenon composed of different strands, movements, and cultural traditions and studying one of these strands individually. One can focus on the author of an alchemical text, or on the history of early Rosicrucianism, or on the practice of channeling in the new age movement, without necessarily seeing them as different moments in the history of esotericism. In the study of esotericism, this makes a significant difference. In fact, contrary to a common misconception, the scholarly study of subjects related to what is presently defined as Western esotericism is not very recent. Undoubtedly, esotericism has been considered by many scholars as a “problematic” factor in the history of Western culture, but this does not mean that it has been completely neglected by them, even before the recent development that brought the study of esotericism to acquire a relative amount of academic recognition.

A bibliography of all the scholarly literature that has focused in the last two centuries on particular aspects, texts, or currents related to Western esotericism would certainly be enormous and would include valuable works. But most of these works dealt with their subjects without posing the question of their belonging to a broader, overarching phenomenon. Especially during the twentieth century, specific esoteric currents, ideas, or texts were often studied to clarify aspects of established areas of research, such as science, philosophy, or art. So it would be logical, for instance, to study a particular alchemical text in the context of the history of science, or to study an early modern treatise on magic in the history of philosophy. Studying these particular cases would help one better understand the transformations that science has gone through in its history and would show how certain subjects have been more complex than was previously assumed. In this case, the scholars studying esoteric subjects are not interested in whether or why they can be understood as “esoteric,” because they are not interested in conceptualizing and defining esotericism in the first place. These subjects are considered relevant or interesting only in so far as they can also be seen, for instance, as “scientific,” “philosophical,” “literary,” or “artistic.” If this situation had continued, no perception of Western esotericism as a broader phenomenon would have ever emerged, and scholars would have continued to study disparate subjects without talking to each other or comparing the results of their research.

EARLY CONCEPTS OF ESOTERICISM

The idea of an ancient tradition of esoteric wisdom took shape already in the late Middle Ages in an Islamic context (von Stuckrad 2010, 26–30) and was later adopted by Christian

philosophers and theologians. This wisdom was supposed to offer the ultimate truth about fundamental questions such as the creation and the structure of the universe, the way to salvation, the place of human beings in the cosmos, and the occult virtues and powers of nature.

During the Renaissance, the idea had two main variants (Hanegraaff 2012, 7–9). The first version, usually termed *prisca theologia* (ancient theology), was that this religious and philosophical wisdom had been handed down in ancient times by sages (such as Zoroaster, Moses, and Hermes Trismegistus) and had then fallen in decline, or even been lost, for a long time. The rediscovery of ancient Greek texts gave some authors the impression that this ancient tradition could now be revived. The second version, usually termed *philosophia perennis* (perennial philosophy), put more “emphasis on the continuity of valid knowledge through all periods of history” (Schmitt 1966, 213). The idea of rupture or decline was less present than in the first version, and there was less of a temporal break in the historical continuity of this tradition. As Hanegraaff has shown, both these variants were based on the idea of a “powerful grand narrative which seriously challenged traditional perspectives on the relation between philosophy and theology, or rationality and revelation” (Hanegraaff 2012, 6).

One could say that the roots of the historical study of esotericism can be found in this grand narrative, which was supposed to explain how the primordial wisdom had traveled across time and space from its origins up to us. However, it should also be noted that the vision on which this narrative was based was more mythical than strictly historical. It was less important to determine what had exactly happened when, than to believe in the persistence throughout the centuries of a message whose ultimate source was God himself.

SUPPORTERS AND DETRACTORS

Whether this idea of a primordial wisdom that was supposed to have antedated Christianity was compatible with Christian theology was one of the main problems that authors had to face. The idea had its supporters but also its detractors, and two opposing discourses were elaborated by religious thinkers from the early modern period on. The first one presented this primordial wisdom as having been rescued from a long period of oblivion. This was therefore perceived as an event of the utmost importance that finally forged new links in the chain of ancient initiates and sages. The second one expressed deep concern about the revival of this wisdom, which was perceived as fostering the presence of pagan elements that could besmirch the original purity of the Christian message. Especially from a Protestant perspective, it was thought that paganism had somehow infiltrated and tainted the original truths of the Gospel and was responsible for its deviations. The idea of a primordial wisdom could only then be interpreted as an attempt to revitalize the pernicious influence of paganism. For this reason, it had to be condemned. If there was a point on which both discourses could agree, it was that this wisdom was somehow distinct from visible, popular religion. Whether it was considered positively or negatively, this tradition was perceived as something different from the religion of the average practitioner; it was either the hidden core of religious truth or the dissimulated aspect of its perversion.

The first historical investigations of esotericism can be found in the works of some German Protestant theologians from the late seventeenth century who display the two opposite attitudes just mentioned (Hanegraaff 2012, 93–127). The first important author is Ehregott Daniel Colberg (1659–1698), whose book *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (The Platonic-Hermetic Christianity; 1690), presented an extremely critical

description of the “Platonic-Hermetic philosophy” and of the currents that derived from it in the history of Christianity. For Colberg, this tradition was responsible for introducing all sorts of pagan mystifications into true religion and was therefore dangerous and pernicious.

At the opposite side of the theological spectrum is the Lutheran pastor Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714). In his *Unparteyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie* (Impartial History of the Church and of the Heretics; 1699–1700), Arnold presented a picture that was completely different from Colberg’s. For him, those movements that had been traditionally considered “heretical” or “sectarian,” many of which would today be called “esoteric,” played an important, positive role in the history of Christianity because they were a vivifying factor against the conservativeness and rigidity of religious institutions. Authors such as Colberg and Arnold, in spite of their evident differences, were still looking at this historical material from a mainly religious perspective.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Some decades later, during the first half of the eighteenth century, a different approach began to emerge. The Enlightenment clearly affected how people conceptualized religion in general, but it also affected those alternative forms of religion that we call esotericism today. For a growing number of authors, traditional theological frameworks of interpretation lost much of their appeal. This was clearly the case with the German Johann Jakob Brucker (1696–1770), whose famous *Historia critica philosophiae* (Critical History of Philosophy; 1742–1744) opened the way to modern scholarly research on the history of philosophy. In this work, Brucker surveys esoteric currents from antiquity up to his time. He seems to share Colberg’s negative attitude toward this material, but one can notice the shift from Colberg’s theologically based critique to an approach that presupposes rational, secular thinking.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Brucker’s monumental work served for a long time as a model of philosophical historiography, but later authors did not seem to share the same interest in esoteric currents as a historical phenomenon. Some romantics (such as the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, 1744–1803) devoted scattered references to them, but no other systematic discussion comparable to Brucker’s appeared during the rest of the eighteenth century. In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the French scholar Jacques Matter (1791–1864) devoted a significant part of his research to the historical study of ancient and modern esoteric currents. He published an important history of gnosticism (1828), in which the word *esotericism* appeared for the first time in the French language, as well as studies on influential modern esoteric authors such as Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, after the emergence of Spiritualism and occultism as new esoteric currents, several authors involved in these currents also developed an interest in historical research. The English occultist Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942) published many influential works on various aspects of Western esotericism (such as alchemy, magic, kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, and illuminism).

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a new sensitivity began to emerge toward subjects associated with esotericism. Scholarly

publications on these subjects began to appear by authors who were sometimes professional academics. Some of these publications focused on subjects such as alchemy, magic, astrology, or secret societies; others focused more on particular historical periods, such as the Renaissance or the Enlightenment.

In Germany, one of the most interesting cases was that of Karl Kiesewetter (1854–1895), who published sympathetic studies on occultism and Spiritualism. His legacy was later taken up by Will Erich Peuckert (1895–1969), who published an important historical study of magic and other esoteric currents in his *Pansophie* ([1936] 1956). A similar development was also visible in France, with authors such as René Le Forestier (1868–1951) and Auguste Viatte (1901–1993), who published important works on esoteric Freemasonry and illuminism in the 1920s and 1930s.

One should also mention the monumental *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (1923–1958) by the American science historian Lynn Thorndike (1882–1965). Few works have done more to give academic dignity to subjects such as magic and the “occult sciences.” In Italy, in the 1930s, scholars such as Paul Oskar Kristeller (1905–1909) and Eugenio Garin (1909–2004) began to take a new look at the influence of Hermetic and Neoplatonic ideas on the Italian Renaissance.

THE WARBURG INSTITUTE

Around the same time, similar research was done at the Warburg Institute, first in Germany and then in England. Founded by Aby Warburg (1866–1929) in Hamburg and then moved to London in 1934 because of the rise of Nazism, the institute has been primarily interested in the legacy of ancient classical culture in medieval and modern Europe, with a special focus on philosophy and the visual arts. From the beginning, this focus has led some institute scholars to develop an interest in subjects such as astrology and magic because they exemplified the persistence of ancient systems of thought in later historical periods.

One of the most important authors to emerge from the Warburg Institute was Frances A. Yates (1899–1981), whose work has had a deep impact on the subsequent development of esotericism as a scholarly field of research. In 1964, she published her *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, which was successful also outside of academe and is now considered a classic by many scholars. Some of Yates’s theses and findings have been disputed by later scholars, but this and her other books have at least drawn the attention of her many readers to aspects of Renaissance culture that had long been neglected.

Yates never tried to define esotericism as a broad category, preferring to talk about a more specific “Hermetic tradition.” Some scholars have questioned the way in which Yates made this concept a general paradigm of the currents of Renaissance philosophy she studied and downplayed the importance of other elements such as Neoplatonism or medieval thought (Hanegraaff 2001). In this sense, the “Hermetic tradition” she described in her book on Bruno could be understood at best as a particular current of esotericism among others, but not as an overarching concept. That theoretical step was taken in the 1990s by Antoine Faivre; before turning to him, however, one should mention a few more significant developments.

ERANOS

The first development is related to the series of yearly seminars called *Eranos* that were held for several decades in Switzerland starting in 1933. These seminars were initiated by a

wealthy Dutch woman, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962), in collaboration with the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). The location was close to Ascona in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. Under the name of *Monte Verità*, it had been one of the main centers of alternative lifestyles and spirituality in Europe since the end of the nineteenth century (Green 1986). Fröbe-Kapteyn had a deep interest in theosophy and mysticism. In her vision, the annual Eranos gatherings were meant to bring together sympathetic scholars who would present lectures on a predetermined theme, focusing especially on the mythical, symbolical, and experiential side of religion (Hakl 2013; Hanegraaff 2012, 277–314). After the seminar, the lectures were collected and published in annual volumes.

Important twentieth-century scholars of religion participated in the Eranos meetings, some attending only once or twice, others regularly over many years. Some of these scholars were working on subjects that can be considered esoteric or related to esotericism. Scholars such as Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) and Henry Corbin (1903–1978), who dedicated most of their work to Jewish and Islamic forms of esotericism, respectively, should at least be mentioned here. Antoine Faivre also lectured at Eranos a few times in the 1970s.

The Eranos phenomenon is important in two ways. First, it shows that, after the Second World War, the academic cultural climate in Europe and America increasingly opened up to subjects related to esotericism and mysticism. It is the same favorable climate from which Frances Yates and other scholars at the Warburg Institute benefited when they published their studies on magical, astrological, and other esoteric traditions in medieval and early modern Europe. When the counterculture of the 1960s took shape, the general climate became even more favorable, spreading also to broader audiences at a popular level.

Second, Eranos has been interpreted by some historians not just as a place where esoteric subjects could be studied and discussed academically but also as an esoteric school in its own right. The two initiators of the Eranos meetings, O. Fröbe-Kapteyn and C. G. Jung, certainly had an “esoteric” agenda of their own that could not be reduced to a purely scholarly interest. This may also have been true for some of the other participants in the seminars, including Corbin, Scholem, and the Romanian historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who wrote comparatively little about Western esotericism but was certainly interested and well-read in the subject.

Eranos could then be seen as an attempt to reconceptualize religion by shifting the focus from its institutional, dogmatic aspects to its experiential, mystical ones. These latter aspects would be considered more real and important, or even as the true inner core of religion itself, which seems close enough to an esoteric understanding of religion (Wasserstrom 1999).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF THE OCCULT

Another important development in the scholarly study of esotericism is the so-called sociology of the occult that emerged in the 1970s. This development can also be directly related to the popular spreading of the counterculture, with its deep interest in alternative forms of spirituality. The sociology of the occult originated with a group of American scholars who noticed the growing interest in “occult” ideas in contemporary Western societies. Compared to the scholars mentioned so far, they were much less interested in the origins and historical development of these ideas and more in their contemporary social dimension.

The most representative figures in this group were Marcello Truzzi (1935–2003) and Edward A. Tiryakian (1929–). They understood the occult as a container of all those cultural forms that have been marginalized and rejected by mainstream institutions from both a religious and scientific point of view. Esotericism was therefore a kind of wastebasket into which all ideas, practices, and beliefs that were considered inappropriate or inconvenient had been dumped. In some of his earlier works, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1963–), who has become one of the foremost specialists of Western esotericism in recent years, considered this idea problematic, at least as it was formulated by Truzzi and Tiryakian (Hanegraaff 1998, 40–42). But Hanegraaff later developed an interpretation of esotericism as a “wastebasket category” that bears at least some similarity with that of the sociology of the occult (Hanegraaff 2012).

THE EMERGENCE OF A SCHOLARLY FIELD

A turning point came in the early 1990s, when the French scholar Antoine Faivre (1934–) published a historical overview of Western esotericism that would have a major impact on the field (Faivre [1992] 2010). Faivre was a professor at the Religious Studies Department of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, a French academic institution for graduate studies and research. He held the only chair for the study of Western esotericism in the world at that time. Faivre represented there a French tradition of scholarly research of esoteric subjects that existed well before him and that had developed both within and without academic institutions.

Even before Faivre, there had been attempts to conceptualize esotericism as a broad historical phenomenon. Robert Amadou (1924–2006) could be mentioned as an early example. In 1950, Amadou published a book titled *L'occultisme*, in which he presented a general definition of *occultism* (a synonym for *esotericism* in this context). Amadou remained an independent scholar, and his works had limited circulation outside of France. The case was different with Antoine Faivre, who had an international academic prestige partly deriving from the institution in which he held his position. His works were published by major publishers and were soon translated into other languages, including English.

Another interesting example is Pierre Riffard, who published an impressive historical survey of Western esotericism in the early 1990s and, like Faivre, included his general definition of esotericism in it (Riffard 1990). Riffard's approach presents some similarities to Faivre's because it defines esotericism on the basis of a closed set of characteristics. But it is also very different from it, because Riffard, unlike Faivre, does not see the combination of these characteristics as typical of a particular culture. In other words, for him, esotericism is a universal phenomenon that can be found everywhere, potentially in any human culture. Whatever its merits, Riffard's definition has had much less impact than Faivre's, especially outside of France.

FAIVRE'S DEFINITION

In the introduction to the small book that Faivre published in 1992, he presented his new definition of Western esotericism. Although his earliest scholarly publications dated back to the mid-1960s, he had not tried to define esotericism systematically or consistently until then. But this time he made an effort to formulate a definition that could be simple and clear, through which all the disparate material that had been studied by scholars under names such as the *occult sciences*, *the occult*, *occultism*, and *magic* could be subsumed under a single concept.

Faivre's starting point is the observation of a "family resemblance" between various religious and philosophical currents in the history of Western culture. He assumes that this family resemblance is based on a common "form of thought" that one can call "esoteric" and that is distinct from other typical forms of Western thought, such as the theological or the scientific. He further claims that it is possible to identify a number of characteristics that are at the basis of the esoteric form of thought. He considers four of these characteristics to be fundamental, and two others to be secondary. The fundamental ones are correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, and transmutation; the two secondary ones are correlation and transmission. The four fundamental characteristics must all be present simultaneously to identify a current, a movement, an author, or a text as esoteric (Faivre [1992] 2010, 25).

An important aspect of Faivre's idea is that it presents esotericism as rooted in a specific cultural context. From a religious point of view, this context corresponds mostly with Western (or Latin) Christianity, leaving only a marginal role to Eastern or Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. For Faivre, it would not make sense to speak of esotericism for cultural areas other than the Western, and he opposes the use of its features that way. The concept of esotericism makes sense only if it is applied to the particular context of Western culture. The limitation is not only geographical but also temporal. Faivre is convinced that esotericism as a specific historical phenomenon only began with the end of the Middle Ages (Faivre and Voss 1995, 51).

According to Faivre, esotericism, as a complex aggregate of various ideas and practices, took shape along with a number of other cultural transformations in early modern Europe. These transformations affected the religious sphere, especially with the emergence of the Reformation, but also the secular sphere with the Scientific Revolution and the birth of new political models such as modern representative democracy. One should also mention the enormous impact of geographical explorations and early forms of colonialism on Western culture. This would explain why a form of thought based on analogies and correspondences would be increasingly perceived as problematic and obsolete by mainstream culture; it would be marginalized but also, ironically, made distinct from the other forms of thought that were also taking shape in this period.

AFTER FAIVRE

The appearance of Faivre's definition of Western esotericism in the early 1990s can be considered a watershed for the field because the definition gave Western esotericism a theoretical basis, but also an academic dignity and visibility, that had hardly materialized until then. It prepared the ground for the developments that would soon follow. This does not mean that Faivre's definition was unanimously accepted. It has been criticized by a younger generation of scholars such as Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Kocku von Stuckrad, who have tried to give their personal solutions to the problem of conceptualizing esotericism.

We do not need to dwell here on these and other more recent critical discussions, as they are the focus of another chapter in this book. On the other hand, one should not think that, after Faivre, all scholars working on subjects related to Western esotericism have been interested in its theoretical dimensions. Some have just continued to do research on particular topics without being concerned about broader definitions, sometimes also because they have been working within the framework of established academic disciplines, which makes such theoretical reflection less necessary. For example, much of the current research on alchemy is being done by scholars who do not see

themselves as specialists of Western esotericism but rather as historians of science. The relevance of the theoretical debate over the definition of Western esotericism remains, therefore, minimal for most of them.

INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

This chapter would not be complete without a brief account of how the study of esotericism has made its entrance and has tried to establish itself within academic institutions. In 1964, the same year in which Frances Yates published her book on Giordano Bruno, the first academic chair explicitly devoted to the study of esotericism was created in Paris at the Department for Religious Studies of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (Faivre 2000, xix–xx).

This event was made possible by a series of favorable circumstances. An interest in subjects related to esotericism was far from being new at the *École Pratique*. Among its staff members, both Henry Corbin and his predecessor, Louis Massignon (1883–1962), had worked on Islamic mysticism and sufism; André-Jean Festugière (1898–1982) was one of the great world specialists of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism (among other things, he prepared, together with A. D. Nock, an important critical edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum*); Henri-Charles Puech (1902–1986) was known for his studies on ancient gnosticism; and the historian of science and philosophy Alexandre Koyré (1892–1964) had devoted important studies to Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme, and alchemy. Koyré had just died, and the department needed to appoint a successor.

As was a tradition of the *École Pratique*, when a new professor was appointed, the name of the chair could be adjusted, depending on his or her qualifications and particular field of expertise. The appointed candidate was François Secret (1911–2003), a specialist of Christian kabbalah, and Corbin suggested to rename the chair “History of Christian Esotericism.”

In 1979, Secret retired and was succeeded by Antoine Faivre, originally a German studies scholar who had worked mainly on eighteenth-century Christian theosophy and natural philosophy. On that occasion, the name of the chair was changed again, becoming “History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe.” That the explicit reference to “Christian” forms of esotericism was dropped shows that there was a concern about delimiting the field too narrowly. In 2002, Faivre retired as well, and the chair went to Jean-Pierre Brach, a specialist of number symbolism and Christian kabbalah.

For a long time, the Paris chair remained the only one in the world for the study of Western esotericism. In 1999, however, a whole new center was created at the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Amsterdam. Unlike at Paris, this was more than a single chair, and the center included from the beginning three permanent staff members: a full professor and two associate professors. Two doctoral positions are also regularly part of the center. It was decided not to use the term *esotericism* in the name of the center and to rather call it “History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents.” Since its creation, Wouter J. Hanegraaff has been the chair of the center.

In 2006, a third chair was created at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (1953–2012), a specialist of the relation between esotericism and radical political movements in the twentieth century, was appointed. He died prematurely,

however, in 2012, and the university decided not to continue with the chair and the related teaching program.

Whereas the number of academic positions explicitly devoted to esotericism remains relatively small, the overall picture is certainly more complex. Apart from chairs and centers, there are also teaching programs that offer a specialization in esotericism at an undergraduate or even graduate level. They include the “Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism” (GEM) graduate certificate program at Rice University in Houston, Texas, spearheaded by April D. DeConick and Jeffrey Kripal; and the “Concealed Knowledge” master’s program at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, launched by Kocku von Stuckrad.

Scholars who recognize themselves as specialists of Western esotericism, or who have a particular interest in the field, are scattered across various academic disciplines in many countries. The need to form a more stable scholarly community of dedicated scholars has naturally led to the creation of associations and networks, the most important of which are the European Association for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), founded in 2005, and the Association for the Study of Esotericism, founded in 2002. They both organize large biannual conferences in alternate years.

Summary

It has taken a long time for esotericism to be recognized as a valid, legitimate field of scholarly research. Although the perception of the phenomenon from a historical point of view dates back at least to the seventeenth century, for a long time a polarized, biased attitude, split between supporters and detractors, prevailed. There was clearly something about esotericism that made it a difficult subject to handle within an academic context. Theologians often perceived it as a dangerous threat to true, pure religion, while Enlightenment thinkers saw it as a typical form of superstitious behavior that had to be cast away so that the new age of rationality and science could kick in.

Some esotericists, especially starting with the nineteenth century, began to develop a certain critical distance that allowed them to be interested in the historical dimension of the tradition they claimed to represent. Their work, however, even when it may have deserved attention, remained limited and, even then, obscure and uncredited in a scholarly context.

With the twentieth century interest in subjects that were not part of either mainstream religious traditions or Western rationality began to increase. After the Second World War, this trend was further boosted by movements developing in society at large, such as the counterculture of the 1960s. Alternative forms of religion and spirituality, new religious movements, and nonconformist intellectual traditions attracted scholars more and more and prompted the creation of new institutional academic space for them.

In this context, the study of Western esotericism emerged as a distinct scholarly field, especially after the early 1990s. Since then, a large scholarly community has grown that is now organized through various international networks and associations. If the study of esotericism was long impeded by the limitations that Western culture had imposed on itself, its growing institutionalization attests to the depth of the changes that have occurred in Western culture since the early 1990s

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