

Esotericism throughout the centuries

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge University, 2012), 478 pp.

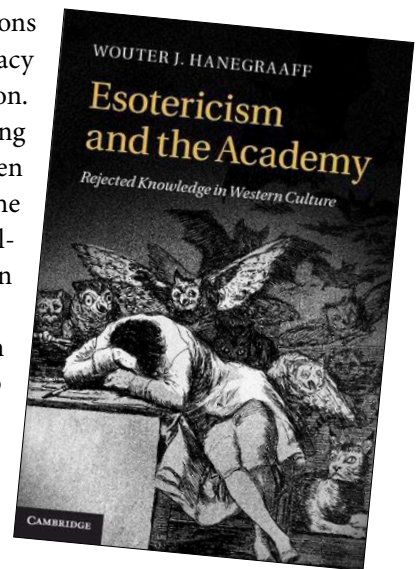
What is today usually referred to as esotericism has throughout history had many labels. Esoteric thought has been called mysticism, magic, superstition, been referred to as a 'tradition' or wisdom tradition, paganism, the occult, and pseudo-science, to name a few examples. In *Esotericism and the Academy* Wouter J. Hanegraaff sets out to write a history of how academics and intellectuals alike have conceptualized esotericism since the Renaissance. Hanegraaff does not give a clear definition of esotericism, but considers that the two elements first put forward by the anti-apologist Jacob Thomasius (1622–84) could still be useful today in narrowing down what type of intellectual worldview esotericism consists of. The first element is a belief that the world is co-eternal with God, in opposition to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The second element is the belief that human beings can themselves obtain direct divine wisdom, or *gnosis*, about their own god-like nature.

The academic study of Western esotericism has since the 1990s grown into an established field in its own right. As Wouter J. Hanegraaff is Professor and head of the Department of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam and he is an excellent candidate for writing a history of how academia has treated the currents of thought that fall under the category of Western esotericism. In the introduction Hanegraaff puts forward the idea that Western esotericism has throughout history presented a challenge to intellectuals and scholars. It has been imagined as a lost para-

dise, a world filled with demons and goblins, or simply as lunacy and a flight from reason. Esotericism has, according to Hanegraaff, always been considered the domain of the Other, upon which scholars have projected their own hopes and fears.

The book gives an insight into the relationship between academia and esotericism over six centuries. The book is divided into four larger chapters and is historically structured. The

starting point for Hanegraaff's inquiry is the revival of Hermetic thought that occurred in Renaissance Italy. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a number of ancient Hermetic and Platonic texts were translated into Latin. Scholars like Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) understood the Hermetic texts as being extremely old, even of antediluvian age, and saw them as fully compatible with Christianity. Ficino developed a *prisca theologia*, a theological concept which highlighted that eternal wisdom could be derived from sources attributed to mythical pagan personas such as Zoroaster, Orpheus, or Hermes Trismegistus. According to the *prisca theologia*, these teachers could, and indeed should, be taken seriously because they had received their wisdom from Moses himself. This type of reconciliation of pagan and Christian thought was in fact nothing new. The Renaissance Hermeticists found support for their claims by echoing ideas put forth already by early Church Fathers such as Origen and Eusebius of Caesaria.



The Hermetic Revival, with its centre in Florence provoked anti-pagan and anti-Platonic polemics. The second and third chapters focus on how intellectuals have sought to demonize and criticize esoteric thought. When Neoplatonic ideas entered the Italian scholarly scene there were already suspicions and objections concerning the mixing of pagan and Christian worldviews. The culmination of a suppression of esoteric thought occurred during the papacy of Clement VIII (1592–1602), with the burning of Giordano Bruno at the stake in the year 1600 being the most notable example.

While the study of Hermetic and Platonic texts for Ficino and Pico Della Mirandola (1463–94) served the purpose of recovering ancient wisdom and thus restoring the full understanding of the plan of God, the anti-apologists studied Western esoteric ideas for the sole purpose of attacking what they considered to be heretical thought.

According to Hanegraaff, the project of ridding Christianity of Platonic and pagan influences undertaken by the anti-apologist Jacob Thomasius had profound implications, as it actually led to the autonomization of the history of philosophy. In the footsteps of Thomasius other pious Lutherans such as Ehregott Daniel Colberg (1659–98) continued to study Neoplatonism and Rosicrucianism, as well as Jacob Böhme's Christian theosophy in order to destroy their credibility. The greatest evil, according to Colberg, was all forms of syncretism. This attack on what was considered heresy, however, actually led to the formation of what would later become the historical study of Western esotericism.

Up until the beginning of the Enlightenment there had existed two major views of Western esotericism. The one sought to reconcile esoteric thought with Christianity and the other saw esotericism as demonic and evil. During the end of the seventeenth century there started emerging a third paradigm whose influence would echo down to the current day. This view sees the category of Western esotericism neither as divine or demonic, but rather as foolish superstition. During the Enlightenment Western esotericism would largely come to be considered as a waste-basket category, full of erroneous, foolish and superstitious beliefs. The project of modernity in turn strengthened to localize esoteric currents in the realm of rejected knowledge. As Hanegraaff points out, the identity of modern post-Enlightenment society both requires and presupposes a counter-category

of the Other. Esoteric worldviews were viewed as the opposite of rational and scientific thought and were thus considered to not have been influential forces in European history. As such they did not deserve the attention of academia. The study of Western esotericism was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries left much to amateurs, who often themselves had some type of esoteric agenda.

A notable development for the study of esotericism were the so-called Eranos meetings, which were first organized in the early 1930s. These meetings included lectures by famous scholars such as Carl Gustav Jung, and later, people such as Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and D. T. Suzuki. The stated purpose of the meetings was to take myth and symbolism seriously. During their heyday in the 1950s and 1960s the Eranos meetings attracted scholars of religion from all around the globe. Many of these scholars would become celebrities whose works became bestsellers. Although Hanegraaff notes that the study of esotericism is in debt to these scholars as their work increased a broader interest in symbolism, alchemy, mysticism, and other forms of rejected knowledge, he clearly expresses his distaste for the paradigm of religionism or essentialism which constituted their main approach. The central interest lay in exploring experiences of the divine that were universal and eternal rather than what was historically and culturally contingent.

As a result of the work of historians like Lynn Thorndike, Frances Yates, and, in the German-speaking world, Will-Erich Peuckert, Western esotericism would become a current that would be taken seriously within the history of philosophy and the history of science. Far from belonging to a waste-basket of foolishness and error, Yates proposed that Hermeticism had played a crucial role in the scientific revolution of the Renaissance. According to Yates's interpretation, the Renaissance Hermeticists were far from being crackpots, but were countercultural visionaries. This idea of a hidden intellectual esoteric tradition suppressed by the Christian church, and later by the scientific establishment, resonated well during the rebellious 1960s. Though acknowledging Yates's contribution, Hanegraaff points out the flaws in her historiography and her grand narrative of an esoteric 'tradition' that she made more coherent than there is evidence to suggest.

Besides Hanegraaff's dislike of religionism he also expresses his frustration about the fact that discour-

sive approaches have become so popular within the study of Western esotericism. Although Hanegraaff admits that discursive approaches may yield interesting and important insights in the study of esotericism, he wishes for more historiographical studies and approaches. Instead of only talking about 'esoteric discourses' he requests that scholars, by means of historical research, pinpoint what is historically given.

Esotericism and the Academy is an insightful book on how esoteric thought has been depicted since the Renaissance. The broad scope of the book in turn limits the analysis and space given to the various time periods and authors. As Hanegraaff's inquiry spans over six centuries there is little room for any in-depth analysis or commentary on how historical events, such as wars, political power struggles, revolutions, and so on, have impacted on the Western intellectual climate and on academic research. Esotericism as a binary opposite or 'mirror image' of the academic identity may be a bit too one-dimensional, or too esoteric, a description. Overall the book offers the reader a good overview of the history of scholarly interest and research into esotericism. The book should be of great interest for any scholar interested in the history of Western esotericism and the scholarship surrounding it. ■

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