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Introductory remarks on the study of western esotericism¹

Het onderzoek naar de westerse esoterie is sinds enkele jaren met een opmars bezig binnen de academische wereld. Wouter Hanegraaff, de enige Nederlandse hoogleraar op dit terrein, geeft een inleiding op haar geschiedenis, maakt een afbakening van dit voor velen nog onbekende onderzoeksgebied en schetst de ontwikkelingen binnen het onderzoek.

Introduction

Defining 'western esotericism' is precisely as difficult as defining 'religion', and for very similar reasons. In both cases, scholarly disagreements about the precise nature and demarcation of the field are bound up with basic and far-reaching theoretical and methodological differences, resulting in a variety of disciplinary approaches which are competing for academic priority.² In the study of western esotericism, as in the study of religion, it is therefore impossible to sidestep questions of method and theory in order to restrict oneself directly to the field of study 'in itself': there simply *is* no such field of study unless and until it is construed as such in the minds of scholars and scholarly communities. Likewise, and for the same reasons, terminological preferences are subject to ongoing academic negotiation: that these respective fields of research should be referred to as 'religion' and 'western esotericism' is not obvious, but constitutes a choice which may be disputed on various grounds, perhaps in favour of

- 1 This article is an abridged and adapted version of an article that was published in: Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz and Randi Warne ed., *New approaches to the study of religion I* (Berlin and New York 2004) 489-519.
- 2 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'On the construction of "esoteric traditions"' in: Antoine Faivre and Hanegraaff ed., *Western esotericism and the science of religion* (Louvain 1998) 11-61; Hanegraaff, 'Defining religion in spite of history' in: Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk ed., *The pragmatics of defining religion. Contexts, concepts and contests* (Leiden, Boston and Köln 1999) 337-378.

alternative labels.³

And yet, in spite of such cautionary remarks, the study of religion and the study of western esotericism both take their departure from the assumption that there does exist some kind of reality (according to at least some meaning of 'exist' and 'reality') to which the labels refer. To claim that Islam is definitely 'religion' does not need to imply any essentialist or *sui generis* approach to religion, but may merely reflect the understanding that the label 'religion' (according to whatever definition happens to be used) is useful as a means of demarcating certain types of human experience and practice. Likewise, the study of western esotericism emerges from the understanding that in western culture we find certain types of human experience and practice which display a sufficient degree of similarity and specificity to be set apart – for pragmatic reasons at least – as a domain of research. Such an understanding has existed in western culture at least since the end of the seventeenth century and arguably since the end of the fifteenth, as will be seen.

While the field in question was originally referred to by general terms such as 'platonic-hermetic Christianity' and 'Christian gnosis', the substantive 'esotericism' (*l'ésotérisme*) is not attested earlier than 1828.⁴ By that time – and increasingly over the following decades – the intended category had already come to be expanded, so as to include not only currents and movements from the fifteenth-seventeenth centuries but also more recent ones of a similar nature and historically connected to earlier ones. In the wake of the Enlightenment, some manifestations of esotericism were already in a process of emancipating themselves from the Christian context which had been self-evident prior to the eighteenth century; and as this process continued during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, western esotericism increasingly came to be perceived as a countercurrent or subculture more or less set apart from the mainstream. We will see that such a perception is misleading: it is essential to understand that western esotericism is all of a

- 3 For 'religion', itself obviously a western term, see e.g. the modern tendency to replace it by terms such as 'the sacred' (discussion in Hanegraaff, 'Defining religion in spite of history', 337-378, especially 364-368 and 373-375). For 'western esotericism', see discussion of various alternative terminologies in Hanegraaff, 'On the construction of "esoteric traditions"', 11-61.
- 4 Jean-Pierre Laurent, *L'ésotérisme chrétien en France au XIXe siècle* (Lausanne 1992) 19. On the history of the term esotericism (*l'ésotérisme*), see also Laurant, *l'ésotérisme* (Paris 1993) 7-13 and Pierre Riffard, *L'ésotérisme* (Paris 1990) 63-137.

piece with the general history of Christianity until deep into the eighteenth century, and that the autonomization of non-Christian types of esotericism since that period is quite as inextricably interwoven with the general processes of the secularization of religion in western culture. Indeed, the social, cultural and epistemological watershed of the eighteenth century constitutes what is arguably *the* central challenge to a general definition of western esotericism⁵: while the existence of strong historical connections and continuities from the Renaissance to the present is not in any doubt, western esoteric currents have nevertheless been changed so dramatically under the impact of secularization processes that one might legitimately wonder how much there is still in common between pre-Enlightenment figures such as e.g. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola or Jacob Böhme on the one hand, and their post-Enlightenment counterparts such as the theosophist Helena P. Blavatsky or – to stretch the comparison to an extreme – the New Ager Shirley MacLaine on the other.

It has been noted that the perception (under whatever name) of western esotericism as a specific domain of human experience and practice goes back at least to the late seventeenth century.⁶ Serious research in this field has been done at least since the first decades of the twentieth century and has been increasing exponentially since the 1960s. Nevertheless it is only recently – essentially since the 1990s – that this research has begun to be recognized by the academic community as constituting a field in itself. This belated recognition is largely due to the residual influence of theological models and presuppositions in the modern study of religion in general and

5 Hanegraaff, 'Defining religion in spite of history', 364-375.

6 See in particular the polemics of Ehregott Daniel Colberg against platonic-hermetic Christianity: Ehregott Daniel Colberg, *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum, Begreifend die Historische Erzählung vom Ursprung und vielerley Secten der heutigen fanatische Theologie, unterm Namen der Paracelsisten, Weigelianer, Rosencreutzer, Quäcker, Böhmisten, Wiedertäufer, Bourignisten, Labadisten, und Quietisten* (Frankfurt and Leipzig 1690-1691), and the defense of the same currents by Gottfried Arnold, *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historien. Vom Anfang des neuen Testaments bis auf das Jahr Christi 1688*. Frankfurt a.M. 1700). Cf. Hanegraaff, 'Gnosis II' in: Christoph Auffarth, Jutta Bernard and Hubert Mohr ed., *Metzler Lexikon Religion I* (Stuttgart and Weimar 1999) 506-510, especially 507-508. With special reference to Carlos Gilly, 'Das Bekenntnis zur Gnosis von Paracelsus bis auf die Schüler Jacob Böhme's' in: Roelof van den Broek and Cis van Heertum ed., *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme. Gnosis, hermetism and the christian tradition* (Amsterdam 2000) 385-425.

the study of Christianity in particular. While the study of religion as such has been emancipating itself from Christian theology ever since the nineteenth century and increasingly during the twentieth, scholars of religion have unfortunately been quite uncritical in adopting crypto-theological perceptions of western esoteric currents – often referred to by means of loaded terms such as ‘magic’ and ‘the occult’ – as marginal heresies and contemptible superstitions unworthy of serious investigation.⁷ The resulting marginalization has been aggravated by the fact that scholars of religion have tended to concentrate on non-western religions while leaving the study of Christianity to church historians and theologians⁸; the latter, in turn, have tended to perpetuate research paradigms which are essentially normative rather than historical, and from the perspective of which esoteric currents were bound to remain neglected. Finally, with respect to esoteric currents since the eighteenth century, the marginalization of the field has been even further aggravated by the fact that the study of this domain was long dominated by the sociological study of ‘New Religious Movements’: a field of obvious importance, but the representatives of which tended to concentrate exclusively on the sociological dimension while neglecting historical research. Again, it is only quite recently that the study of ‘New Religious Movements’ has begun to be more attentive to history.⁹ In sum: again and again, and from various perspectives, the study of western esotericism has found itself caught between a rock and hard place. The result is a very serious lack of academic expertise in this domain, which is only now beginning to be corrected.¹⁰

7 Cf. Randall Gray Styers, *Magical theories. Magic, religion and science in modernity* (Ph.D. dissertation Duke University 1997); Hanegraaff, ‘The emergence of the academic science of magic. The occult philosophy in Tylor and Frazer’ in: Arie L. Molendijk and Peter Pels ed., *Religion in the making. The emergence of the sciences of religion* (Leiden, Boston and Köln 1998) 253-275.

8 As succinctly formulated by Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, ‘Esoterik in der frühen Neuzeit. Zum Paradigma der Religionsgeschichte zwischen Mittelalter und Moderne’, *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 27 (2000) 321-364, especially 323: ‘die Arbeitsteilung zwischen den Theologen und der Religionswissenschaft ist ja traditionell dadurch bestimmt, dass die Religionsgeschichte des christlichen Abendlandes theologisch bearbeitet wird, nur aussereuropäische Kulturräume religionswissenschaftlich erforscht werden.’

9 See, e.g., the writings of scholars like J. Gordon Melton, Massimo Introvigne, and Jean-François Mayer.

The world's first academic chair in the field, entitled "History of Christian Esotericism", was established at the 5th section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (Sorbonne) in Paris in 1965. It was held by Francois Secret from 1965 to 1979, when he was succeeded by Antoine Faivre, and the title was changed to 'History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe'; Faivre was succeeded in 2002 by Jean-Pierre Brach, and the title was changed to 'History of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe'. Until 1999 this has remained the only chair in the world. Like the other chairs in the E.P.H.E., it is essentially a research position, the teaching load consisting of a weekly two-hour seminar which is not part of the general student curricula of the Paris Universities. As a result, while the previous chairholder has exerted a major influence on the study of western esotericism by means of his publications as well as by supervising doctoral and Ph.D. theses, he has not been in a position to establish a formal 'school' or research tradition integrated in the French university system.

In 1999 a second chair, devoted to 'History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents', was established at the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands). It is connected with a new subdepartment of the same title, which also includes two full-time lecturer/researchers, two Ph.D. students, and secretarial staff. Wouter J. Hanegraaff was appointed full professor on this chair, and two lecturer/researchers were appointed for the period Renaissance-eighteenth century and nineteenth-twentieth century respectively. For the former position were appointed Jean-Pierre Brach (2000-2002) and Kocku von Stuckrad (2003-present); for the latter Olav Hammer (2001-2003) and Marco Pasi (2004-present). The subdepartment offers a minor 'Western Esotericism' as part of the B.A. program religious studies, and an English-language M.A. program 'Mysticism and Western Esotericism' open

- 10 This correction results not just from the recent development of western esotericism as a field of research, but also from a major reorientation that is taking place in the study of religion in the west. As summarized by Neugebauer-Wölk, 'Esoterik in der frühen Neuzeit', 323: 'Die Religionswissenschaft hat die europäische Religionsgeschichte entdeckt und mit ihr deren Vielfalt.' With reference to an important programmatic article by Burkhard Gladigow ('Europäische Religionsgeschichte' in: Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi ed., *Lokale Religionsgeschichte* (Marburg 1995) 21-42), she explains the centrality of western esotericism with respect to the new emphasis by historians of religion on the 'Europäische Markt an Sinnangeboten' i.e. on *pluralism* as a fundamental characteristic of the history of religion in Europe since the Renaissance.

to international students has been offered since 2003 in a one-year and a two year variant . The presence in the same city of the world's best collection of hermetic literature, the *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica*, provides excellent conditions for collaboration, so that Amsterdam may be expected to play an important role in the future development of the discipline. The new chair has elicited positive reactions internationally, and there is reason to expect that the example set by the University of Amsterdam will be followed by other universities in the years to come.

A Short Historical Overview

While human thinking and behaviour is far too fluid and complex to be caught in neat theoretical categories, such categories can nevertheless be useful as a means of orientation through the jungle of history. In order to get a grip on the field of western esotericism as well as to understand the reasons for its traditional marginalization, it is useful to distinguish between three general strategies which have been used in western culture in order to find 'truth'.¹¹ It is important, however, to understand that these three strategies are of an ideal-typical nature, i.e., that they are not mutually exclusive and should not be reified. How important this caveat is for a correct understanding of the nature of western esotericism will become evident below.

A first strategy relies on human reason, observation, and argumentation: this is the approach basic to rational philosophy and scientific research. A second one relies on the authority of a collectively-accepted divine revelation, which is believed to transcend mere human wisdom: this approach is essential to established religion and doctrinal theology. A third one, finally, relies on the authority of personal spiritual experience or interior enlightenment: this approach may conveniently be referred to as *gnosis*, and has always had a problematic relationship to the first two approaches. The fact that its adherents look for truth 'beyond reason' has made them look like obscurantists in the eyes of rationalist philosophy and science; and the fact that they believe to have personal access to divine revelation has evoked the suspicion that they are bypassing the authority of established religion and its collectively recognized sources of revelation. In short: those

11 Roelof van den Broek en Hanegraaff, 'Preface' in: Idem ed., *Gnosis and hermeticism from antiquity to modern times* (Albany 1998) vii-x.

who have relied to a considerable extent on this third approach tend to be suspected of irrationalism and excessive individualism, while they in turn blame their opponents for relying on religious authoritarianism and excessive rationalism.

Undoubtedly the most famous manifestation of this third perspective in late antiquity is known as Gnosticism. But far more important for the study of western esotericism as understood here - although less important from the perspective of early Church history - is another movement of the same period which relied on *gnosis*, and is known as hermetism. Originating in Hellenistic Egypt, and flourishing in the second and third centuries CE, this current derives its name from a mythical and quasi-divine founder, Hermes Trismegistus (i.e., the 'Thrice-Greatest Hermes'). Among the many writings attributed or linked to Hermes, most important and influential have been the collection known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and a longer text entitled *Logos Teleios* but known in its latin translation as *Asclepius*. The *Asclepius* was known in the latin west throughout the Middle Ages, but the *Corpus Hermeticum* only became widely known after it had been translated by the Florentine neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino in 1463 (printed in 1471).

This translation has proved to be of pivotal importance for the development of alternative 'esoteric' spiritualities in modern and contemporary western society. Foundational Renaissance thinkers such as Ficino (1433-1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) saw in Hermes one of the earliest and hence most authoritative sources of a *prisca theologia* or ancient theology. This primordial wisdom had supposedly been revealed by God to Adam, but had declined after the Fall. It was kept alive, however, by a succession of divinely inspired sages, beginning with Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus.¹² Since this primordial wisdom had been revealed by God himself, it was necessarily consistent with the most profound mysteries of the Christian faith and could be seen as a prophetic announcement of it. This in itself accounts for the great spiritual authority attached to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and that authority was enhanced further by the suggestion that the teachings of the Egyptian Hermes had been a source for Moses as well as for Plato: accordingly, the hermetic philosophy could be seen as a means to reconcile philosophy and Christianity, reason and faith. An important

12 D.P.Walker, *The ancient theology* (London 1972); Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra. Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit*, 2 (Berlin and New York 1998).

corollary of the authority attached to 'Hermes' was a new appreciation of the so-called 'occult sciences': magic, astrology and alchemy. The *Corpus Hermeticum* contains a spiritual philosophy with very little reference to occult sciences; but since these sublime teachings were supposedly written by the same author to whom had long been attributed a wide array of magical, astrological and alchemical writings, the latter were bound to be perceived in a new and more positive light. As a result, the 'hermetic philosophy' of the Renaissance came to be linked from the very beginning with a revival of the occult sciences. In the writings of authors such as Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), Francesco Giorgi da Veneto (1466-1540), Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Paracelsus (1493/94-1541), and many others, the outlines appeared of a new type of religious syncretism: a mixture of Christianity, Neoplatonism, Hermetism, Magic, Astrology, Alchemy as well as an important new phenomenon: Christian reinterpretations and adaptations of the Jewish Kabbalah. The latter phenomenon derived its essential impulse from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *900 Theses* (1486), which included 47 'kabbalistic conclusions', and was taken up by a great number of influential authors such as Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) and many others in the centuries to come.¹³

During the sixteenth century, a basic 'referential corpus' of writings thus came into existence which, in spite of variations and divergences, clearly displays a common direction. While the Hermetic writings are certainly not its only source – see also, for example, the authority of the Chaldaean Oracles, incorrectly attributed to Zoroaster¹⁴ – the authority attached to 'Hermes' is certainly sufficient to refer to this new syncretism as 'Hermeticism' in a general and encompassing sense (as distinct from 'Hermetism', which is taken as referring specifically to the teachings of the *Hermetica* and its commentaries). This phenomenon of Renaissance Hermeticism is the historical foundation of what is now commonly referred to as 'western

13 The best introduction to Renaissance hermeticism (but to be read with caution) remains Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the hermetic tradition* (London and Chicago 1996). For the Christian kabbalah and its later developments, see e.g. François Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Neuilly-sur-Seine and Milano 1985) and Andreas Kilcher, *Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma. Die Konstruktion einer ästhetischen Kabbala seit der frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart and Weimar 1998).

14 Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra. Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit*, 2 (Berlin and New York 1998) 35 ff.

esotericism'. As the main modern and contemporary representative of the 'third component' referred to above, its representatives emphasize the importance of personal religious experience or *gnosis*, and since such types of experience are hard or impossible to express discursively and logically, they display a marked preference for mythical and symbolic language. More specifically, the worldview of traditional western esotericism has been defined as a 'form of thought' characterized by four intrinsic characteristics and two extrinsic characteristics: (1) a belief in invisible and non-causal 'correspondences' between all visible and invisible dimensions of the cosmos, (2) a perception of nature as permeated and animated by a divine presence or life-force, (3) a concentration on the religious imagination as a power that provides access to worlds and levels of reality intermediate between the material world and God, (4) the belief in a process of spiritual transmutation by which the inner man is regenerated and re-connected with the divine, (5) the belief in a fundamental concordance between several or all spiritual traditions and (6) the idea of a more or less secret transmission of spiritual knowledge.¹⁵

In 1614, the Swiss scholar Isaac Casaubon provided conclusive proof that the *Corpus Hermeticum* dated not from a remote antiquity but from the first centuries after Christ, thereby exploding the Renaissance myth of Hermes Trismegistus. However, while this discovery eventually weakened the authority of the Hermetic writings among intellectuals, it did not prevent religious currents originating in Renaissance hermeticism from continuing during the seventeenth century and beyond.¹⁶ Of particular importance in this respect is the so-called Rosicrucian *furor* caused by the anonymous publication, in Germany and beginning in the very same year as Casaubon's book, of two manifestoes - the *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614) and *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615) - which claimed to be messages from a mysterious brotherhood of the Rose Cross. A year later they were followed by a third text which, although its form and character is quite different, is usually regarded as the third manifesto in the series: a symbolic novel of initiation known as *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreuz* (1616). We now know that all three manifestoes have originated in Tübingen, in a circle of friends around the Paracelsian doctor Tobias Hess (1558-1614),

15 Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western esotericism* (Albany 1994) 10-15.

16 Jan Assmann, "'Hen kai pan': Ralph Cudworth und die Rehabilitierung der hermetischen Tradition' in: Neugebauer-Wölk ed., *Aufklärung und Esoterik* (Hamburg 1999) 38-52.

and that their author was the Lutheran pastor Johann Valentin Andreae (1586-1654). Due to the excited discussions caused by these pamphlets, the image of a 'Rosicrucian brotherhood' took hold in the popular imagination, as seen for example in the work of much-discussed authors and self-proclaimed 'rosicrucians' such as Michael Maier (1568-1622) and Robert Fludd (1574-1637). While there is no evidence that a Rosicrucian brotherhood actually existed in the seventeenth century, various movements claiming to be its heirs would come into existence during the eighteenth century. The strongly paracelsian and alchemical type of hermeticism typical of the Rosicrucian current generally flourished in baroque culture, giving rise to a speculative tradition characterized in particular by its rich production of emblematic and allegorical imagery.

Parallel to the Rosicrucian current, the writings of the great visionary philosopher Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) laid the foundations for another highly influential western esoteric tradition known as Christian theosophy, the influence of which was to continue throughout the century with representatives such as Johann Georg Gichtel (1638-1710), John Pordage (1608-1681) and Jane Leade (1624-1704). The current continued into the eighteenth century with authors such as Dionysius Andreas Freher (1649-1728), William Law (1686-1761) and Friedrich Christian Oetinger (1702-1782); and from there into the heart of the German Romantic movement, with representatives including Franz von Baader (1765-1841) and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803). Christian theosophy came to be closely linked to the emergence of German *Naturphilosophie*, including a strong interest in magic and the 'occult' phenomena associated with 'the Night-Side of Nature'.¹⁷ It flourished, finally, in the so-called Illuminist current of the later eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, partly linked to new initiatory societies modeled upon or connected with Freemasonry such as the theurgical Elus Coëns, The Illuminés d'Avignon, the Rectified Scottish Rite, the Order of the Gold and Rosy Cross and the Asiatic Brethren. The existence and influence of a popular as well as a learned Hermeticism during the Age of Reason, partly linked to Freemasonry and the general surge of secret societies in this period, has recently been receiving more attention from historians, and challenges received ideas about the nature and history of the Enlightenment.¹⁸

17 Catherine Crow, *The night-side of nature. Or ghosts and ghost-seers* (Wellingborough 1986).

18 Neugebauer Wölk, *Aufklärung und Esoterik* (Hamburg 1999).

Western esotericism emerged as a syncretistic type of religiosity in a Christian context, and its representatives were Christians until far into the eighteenth century. From about the middle of that century, however, the complicated historical processes that may be referred to under the general heading of 'secularization' began to have their impact on western culture and religion generally, and they naturally affected esotericists as well. If we understand the term 'secularization' as referring not to a process in which religion declines or vanishes but, rather, to a process of profound *change and transformation of religion* under the impact of a combination of historically unprecedented social and political conditions¹⁹, we may speak not just of a 'secularization of religion' but also, more specifically, of a 'secularization of esotericism' during the nineteenth century. The result of this process was a new type of esotericism that may be referred to as *occultism*, and comprises all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world.²⁰

Early signs of a secularization of western esotericism may be perceived in the perspectives of the Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), both of whom have exerted an incalculable influence on the history of esotericism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²¹ Theurgical practices, spiritual manifestations and 'psychic' phenomena of a type already present in some esoteric societies of the later eighteenth century as well as in the popular practice of 'magnetic healing' achieved mass popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the occultist movement *par excellence* known as Spiritualism. Spiritualism provided a context within which a plethora of more or less sophisticated occultist movements came into existence. Among these manifestations of alternative religiosity, the Theosophical Movement founded in 1875 by the Russian Madame Helena P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) is certainly the most important in terms of its influence, and the basic metaphysical system of modern theosophy may be considered the archetypal manifestation of occultist spirituality at least until far into the 1970s. Side to side with modern theosophy, and connected with it in complex ways, appeared a variety of occultist currents with an emphasis on

19 Hanegraaff, 'Defining religion in spite of history', 337-378.

20 Ibidem, *New Age religion and Western culture. Esotericism in the mirror of secular thought* (Leiden, New York and Köln 1996) 422.

21 Ibidem, 424-435.

magical practice. Of particular importance in this respect is the influence of the French author Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810-1875), better known under his pen-name Eliphas Lévi. Among the more important manifestations of occultist magic in the second half of the nineteenth century one might mention the occultist milieu that flourished in fin-de-siècle France, around figures such as Gérard Encausse (1865-1916), known as Papus; and organizations such as the English Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Finally, popular practices of 'magnetic healing' also referred to as 'mesmerism' reached the United States as early as 1836 and spread widely in the following decades, eventually providing a popular basis for the emergence of the so-called 'New Thought' movement of the later nineteenth century. Each one of these various currents - Spiritualism, Modern Theosophy, Occultist Magic, and the American New Thought movement - has taken on a multitude of forms, and their representatives have mingled and exchanged ideas and practices in various way. The result of all this alternative religious activity was the emergence, during the nineteenth century, of an international 'cultic milieu' with its own social networks and literature; relying on an essentially nineteenth-century framework of ideas and beliefs, this cultic milieu has continued and further developed during the twentieth century, eventually to provide the foundation after World War II for the emergence of the New Age movement.

Western esotericism and secularization

The occultist milieu of the nineteenth and twentieth century differs from traditional western esotericism in at least four crucial respects. Firstly, esotericism was originally grounded in an 'enchanted' worldview where all parts of the universe were linked by invisible networks of non-causal 'correspondences' and a divine power of life was considered to permeate the whole of nature. Although esotericists have continued to defend such an enchanted 'holistic' view of the world as permeated by invisible forces, their actual statements demonstrate that they came to compromise in various ways with the 'mechanical' and 'disenchanted' world-models that achieved cultural dominance under the impact of scientific materialism and nineteenth-century positivism. Accordingly, occultism is characterized by hybrid mixtures of traditional esoteric and modern scientific-materialist worldviews: while originally the religious belief in a universe brought forth by a personal God was axiomatic for esotericism, eventually this belief

succumbed partly or completely to popular scientific visions of a universe answering to impersonal laws of causality. Even though the laws in question may be referred to as 'spiritual', nonetheless they tend to be described according to models taken from science rather than religion.²²

Secondly, the traditional Christian presuppositions of modern western esotericism were increasingly questioned and relativized due to new translations of oriental religious texts and the emergence of a 'comparative study of the religions of the world'. Oriental religions began to display missionary activities in western countries and their representatives typically sought to convince their audience by using western terms and concepts to present the spirituality of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Conversely, since occultists had always believed that the essential truths of esoteric spirituality were universal in nature and could be discovered at the heart of all great religious traditions in the east and west, it was natural for them to incorporate oriental concepts and terminology into already-existing western-occultist frameworks. One excellent example is the concept of 'karma' that was adopted by Blavatsky from Hinduism, as a welcome alternative for Christian concepts of divine providence, whereas Blavatsky's essential understanding of reincarnation depended on western-esoteric rather than oriental sources.²³

Thirdly, the well-known debate between Christian creationism and the new theories of evolution became highly relevant to occultism as well, and in this battle occultists generally took the side of 'science'. But although popular evolutionism became a crucial aspect of occultism as it developed from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, and although this evolutionism was generally used as part of a strategy of presenting occultism as scientifically legitimate, the actual types of evolutionism found in occultism depended less on Darwinian theory than on philosophical models originating in German Idealism and Romanticism. The idea of a universal process of spiritual evolution and progress, involving human souls as well as the universe in its entirety, is not to be found in traditional western esotericism but became fundamental to almost all forms of nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism.²⁴

Finally, the emergence of modern psychology (itself dependent partly on Mesmerism and the Romantic fascination with the 'night-side of na-

22 Idem, 421-442; Olav Hammer, *Claiming knowledge. Strategies of epistemology from theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden, Boston and Köln 2001) 201-330.

23 Hanegraaff, *New Age religion and Western culture*, 442-462.

24 Ibidem, 462-482.

ture') has had an enormous impact on the development of occultism from the second half of the nineteenth century on. While psychology could be used as an argument against Christianity and against religion generally, by arguing that God or the gods are merely projections of the human psyche, it also proved possible to present western-esoteric worldviews in terms of a new psychological terminology. Most influential in this respect was the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), whose spiritual perspective was deeply rooted in the esoteric and occult currents of German Romantic *Naturphilosophie* but whose theories could be used to present that spirituality as a 'scientific' psychology. Apart from Jung, the 'pop psychology' of the American New Thought movement has been a major influence on the mixtures of occultism and psychology typical of contemporary New Age spirituality.²⁵

To these four main aspects of the 'secularization of western esotericism', perhaps a fifth one should be added that became dominant only after World War II, and is fully characteristic of the New Age movement of the 1980s and 1990s: the impact of capitalist market economy on the domain of spirituality. Increasingly, the New Age movement has taken the shape of a 'spiritual supermarket' where religious consumers pick and choose the spiritual commodities they fancy, and use them to create their own spiritual syntheses 'fine-tuned' to their strictly personal needs. The phenomenon of a spiritual supermarket is not limited to the New Age movement only, but is a general characteristic of religion in (post-)modern western democracies. Various forms of New Age spirituality are competing with more traditional forms of religion (including the Christian churches as well as other great religious traditions such as Islam or Buddhism) and with a great number of so-called new religious movements, popularly referred to as 'cults'. However, in this universal battle for the attention of the consumer, the New Age movement enjoys certain advantages over most of its competitors, which seem to make it the representative *par excellence* of the contemporary 'spirituality of the market'. Whereas most other spiritual currents that compete for the attention of the consumer in modern society take the form of (at least rudimentary) organizations, enabling their members to see themselves as part of a religious community, New Age spirituality is strictly focused on the individual and his/her personal development. In fact, this individualism functions as an in-built defense mechanism against social organization

25 Ibidem, 482-513.

and institutionalization: as soon as any group of people involved with New Age ideas begins to take up 'cultic' characteristics, this very fact already distances them from the basic individualism of New Age spirituality. The stronger they begin to function as a 'cult', of even as a 'sect', the more will other New Agers suspect that they are becoming a 'church' (i.e., that they are relapsing into what are considered old-fashioned patterns of dogmatism, intolerance and exclusivism), and the less will they be acceptable to the general cultic milieu of New Age spirituality.²⁶ Within the present social context of a democratic free market of ideas and practices, the New Ages strict emphasis on the Self and on individual experience as the only reliable source of spiritual truth, the authority of which can never be overruled by any religious 'dogma' or considerations of solidarity with communal values, functions as an effective mechanism against institutionalization of New Age religion into a religion.²⁷ This essential individualism makes the New Ager into the ideal spiritual consumer. Except for the very focus on the Self and its spiritual evolution, there are no constraints *a priori* on a New Ager's potential spiritual interests; the fact that every New Ager continually creates and re-creates his or her own private system of symbolic meaning and values means that spiritual suppliers on the New Age market enjoy maximum opportunities for presenting him or her with ever-new commodities.²⁸

Paradigms in the study of western esotericism

Until the 1960s historians of science and philosophy had mostly adopted a whiggish modernist approach as summarized by George Sarton in his *Introduction to the History of Science*: 'The historian of science cannot devote much attention to the study of superstition and magic, that is, of unreason (...) Human folly being at once unprogressive, unchangeable, and unlimited, its study is a hopeless understaking.'²⁹ This unproductive attitude was changed due to the influence of a book published in 1964 by the intellectual historian Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic*

26 Ibidem, 12-18.

27 Hanegraaff, 'Defining religion in spite of history'; Idem, 'New Age spiritualities as secular religion. A historian's perspective', *Social Compass* 46 (1999) 145-160; Idem, 'New Age religion and secularization.' *Numen* 47(2000) 288-312.

28 Idem, 'New Age spiritualities as secular religion'.

29 George Sarton, *Introduction to the history of science* I (London 1953) 19.

*Tradition.*³⁰ Since the 1930s, Italian researchers such as Kristeller and Garin had begun to call attention to the importance of hermeticism in Renaissance culture³¹, but the impact of this research had remained limited to the circles of specialists. As a gifted and imaginative writer, Yates was able to present 'the Hermetic tradition' to an English-speaking audience in a manner that struck her readers as a revelation: an entire forgotten tradition, marginalized by the theologians and suppressed by mainstream science, suddenly seemed to have been brought to light. Moreover, in an influential article published in 1967, Yates went beyond her book on Bruno in making far-reaching claims about the Hermetic Tradition as an essential, almost causal factor in the emergence of the scientific revolution³², and this led to vehement academic debates all through the 1970s and beyond.³³ Nowadays the extreme idea of the Hermetic Tradition as a causal factor in the emergence of modern science is no longer accepted by historians, although weaker versions of it remain widely current; but the debate fueled by Yates provocative theses had the highly positive effect that the importance of the 'hermetic' dimension in the seventeenth-century scientific and intellectual discourse is now generally recognized.³⁴ Thus the study of hermetic currents is now well-established and recognized by historians of Renaissance philosophy and of the Scientific Revolution.

The new interest in 'the Hermetic tradition' has also had its effects outside the domain of history of philosophy and science. Since the 1960s there has been a rapid development of research, from a variety of discipli-

30 Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the hermetic tradition*.

31 Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli. Contributo alla diffusione delle idee ermetiche nel rinascimento', *Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superior di Pisa, Lettere, Storia e Filosofia* 2 (1938) 237-62. Reprinted in Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance thought and letters* I (Rome 1956) 221-247; Eugenio Garin, *Moyen Age et Renaissance* (Paris 1969).

32 Yates, 'The hermetic tradition in Renaissance science' in: Ch. Singleton ed., *Art, science and history in the Renaissance* (Baltimore 1967) 255-274.

33 For synthetic overview of the debate, see e.g. Brian P. Copenhaver, 'Natural magic, hermeticism, and occultism in Early Modern science' in: David C. Lindberg and Robert S. Westman, ed., *Reappraisals of the scientific revolution* (Cambridge 1990) and Floris H. Cohen, *The scientific revolution. A historiographical inquiry* (Chicago and London 1994).

34 See e.g. the cases of Newton (Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The janus face of genius. The role of alchemy in Newton's thought* (Cambridge 1991)) and Boyle (Lawrence M. Principe, *The aspiring adept. Robert Boyle and his alchemical quest* (Princeton 1998)).

nary perspectives, into a large range of specific currents and personalities belonging to the field of western esotericism as understood here. While part of this research has been inspired by perennialist and religionist motivations, a large part has been historical and empirical in nature. Such studies have increased exponentially during the 1980s and 1990s but, surprisingly perhaps, this has not led to academic recognition of western esotericism as a specific field of research in the humanities. In other words: the scholarly study of western esotericism has been flourishing for decades, but it has done so *invisibly*, carried by the individual efforts of essentially isolated individuals, rather than by an internationally organized academic discipline with its own research paradigms, scholarly journals, congresses and symposia, academic chairs, and so on. This failure – until quite recently – of western esotericism to gain academic recognition as a field of research has to do essentially with the influence of perennialist and religionist approaches, which were correctly perceived (and hence rejected) by academics as religious rather than scholarly in inspiration. The public ‘image’ of the study of western esotericism in the 1970s and 1980s came to be dominated by explicit or implicit countercultural ideologies in which Yates grand narrative of ‘the Hermetic Tradition’ was interpreted from religionist perspectives reflecting the *Eranos* approach.³⁵ As a result, students of western esotericism tended to be suspected of being krypto-esotericists rather than academic scholars, and such perceptions are still current. Predictably, therefore, many specialists of specific currents and personalities still prefer not to be associated with the label ‘esotericism’, perceived by them as tainted with overtones of the New Age. Understandable though such an attitude may be, it has the adverse effect of discouraging interdisciplinary contact and exchange between specialists whose fields of study have much in common.

The number of generalists in the study of western esotericism – scholars whose research may obviously be of a specialized and detailed nature no less than in the previous category, but who perceive the study of western esotericism as their general discipline – is still relatively small.³⁶ The explanation is quite simple: the existing lack of academic positions has made it very difficult for any scholar to devote him- or herself entirely to this field,

35 Hanegraaff, ‘Beyond the Yates paradigm. The study of Western esotericism between counterculture and new complexity’, *Aries* 1(2001) 5-37.

36 The category includes e.g. Antoine Faivre, the late James Webb, Joscelyn Godwin, Arthur Versluis, Gerhard Wehr, Christopher McIntosh, Jean-Pierre Laurant, Jean-

and the lack of general international academic structures and organizational bodies has worked against the development of a critical academic debate, productive exchange of views and ideas, and the formation of basic research paradigms. During the 1990s, however, several new developments have taken place which inspire confidence in the development of western esotericism into a recognized academic discipline.

As reflected by Habermas' formula *neue Unübersichtlichkeit*, the key word in historically-based research in the humanities since the 1990s is *complexity*. Like other disciplines, the study of western esotericism must avoid – or rather, overcome – the traditional mistake of reifying the domain of 'western esotericism' by perceiving it as a quasi-autonomous 'counterculture' or 'undercurrent' set apart from the dominant currents of western mainstream culture (and accordingly of little relevance to them). The challenge of the field lies precisely in the opposite direction: that of exploring the complex interwovenness of 'western esotericism' with the general development of western religion and culture since the Renaissance. In other words: rather than as a quasi-autonomous counterculture or undercurrent, western esotericism is more profitably understood as merely a neglected dimension of modern western religion and culture itself, which needs to be explored in order to better understand the latter's nature and development. In the end, to study pre-Enlightenment manifestations of western esotericism means quite simply to study pre-Enlightenment Christian culture³⁷ while concentrating on dimensions which have not received sufficient attention. Likewise, to study the development of western esotericism since the eighteenth century

Pierre Brach, Olav Hammer, and the author of this article. Of course not all these authors cover all periods from Renaissance to present in their actual research; but even if they concentrate on a more specific area, their approach demonstrates that they perceive their work primarily as contributions to the study of western esotericism in a general sense.

37 The assumption made here (obvious to the historian of religion, but unfortunately still far from generally appreciated) is that the phenomenon of Christianity can in no way be restricted to its doctrinal-theological dimension only, nor to a church history concentrating merely on the established churches, important though the latter may be. As a cultural and religious system, Christianity has a variety of dimensions – e.g. ritual, magic, various experiential practices and phenomena, folklore, art, and so on – which are increasingly attracting the interest of historians but still tend to be neglected by theologians (on this point, cf. Hanegraaff, 'The Dreams of Theology and the Realities of Christianity' in: J. Haers and P. de Mey ed., *Theology and conversation. Towards a relational theology*. (Leuven 2003) 709-733.

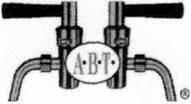
means quite simply to study the western process of secularization of religion while again concentrating on dimensions which have only been cursorily treated by earlier generations.

The moral of this overview should be clear. Western esotericism is more than just another previously-neglected domain of study in need of being recovered for academic research. In addition to this, it is a discipline which happens to hold great innovative potential for the study of religion generally. This is true on the purely historical level as well as on the level of theory and method. As for the former, the study of western esotericism indeed requires the development of new approaches to Christianity and secular culture, leading to a significant revision of traditional views. As for the latter, it opens a perspective on the development of new frameworks for analysis and interpretation which might well revolutionize the study of religion. The potential is there; but needless to say, it will only come to fruition if scholars will recognize its presence and take up the challenge.

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