

Contemporary Esotericism

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Introduction

What is esotericism? While we may recognize various phenomena, practices, and beliefs as belonging to “esotericism”, “the occult”, or “mysticism” when we come across them, we have difficulties when trying to explain what the core characteristics of this larger category are and what in specific qualifies phenomena for inclusion in it. The domain of the esoteric is vague, amorphous, and generally perplexing, not least because many of the phenomena that it houses have for a very long time been deemed unworthy of serious scholarly or theological attention. It is thus not surprising that when scholars have finally come around to studying “esotericism” there are no definitions, demarcations, or descriptions that are undisputedly agreed upon. Instead there are a multitude of different and sometimes conflicting approaches and perspectives, each shedding light on different but equally important aspects. Nonetheless, there are phenomena, groups, and philosophies – such as “the occult sciences” (commonly magic, alchemy, and astrology), German naturphilosophie and Christian Theosophy, initiatory societies, and nineteenth century occultism – that more or less all scholars agree belong within esotericism. The situation is complicated considerably, however, when contemporary phenomena are discussed. I will here briefly deal with some of the various ways in which esotericism has been conceptualized, before moving on to discuss esotericism in late modernity, a number of modern esoteric currents, and esotericism in relation to society at large.

Esotericism as inner tradition

Among self-avowed occultists, in much non-specialist scholarship, and in some older specialist research esotericism is presented as a more or less self-contained and homogenous tradition. Not seldom, particularly among more ideologically minded commentators, it is regarded as an enduring counter-tradition that has been persecuted throughout history. Though it might seem counterintuitive, this view often goes hand in hand with the rhetoric that esotericism constitutes the common inner core of many or all religions. Rather than regarding it as a valid scholarly perspective, most specialists of Western esotericism recognize this notion as a key feature of esoteric discourse that can be traced back to the Renaissance notions of *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) and *philosophia perennis* (eternal philosophy). The former perspective holds that while ancient wisdom may have left traces in contemporary religion and philosophy it has for the most part been lost over time. It thus needs to be rediscovered

and reawakened, suggesting that radical reform is necessary. In the latter perspective, ancient wisdom is regarded to still be present and contemporary religion is in fact the ideal expression of it.

Esotericism as a worldview

The modern study of (Western) esotericism got its start in the early 1990s when Antoine Faivre formulated a model in which Western esotericism was conceived of as “an ensemble of spiritual currents in modern and contemporary Western history which share a certain *air de famille*, as well as the form of thought which is its common denominator”.¹ This “form of thought” is identified by four core notions: everything in existence is linked through a series of invisible correspondences; nature is animated by divine forces, and the “book of nature” can therefore be read for meaning just as the holy scriptures; higher knowledge can be accessed through intermediary beings and the faculty of imagination, which as an “organ of the soul”² provides more reliable information than the senses; and practices of transmutation through which a person can purify and perfect his/her essence so that it can ascend to the divine plane. In addition Faivre suggested that esotericism often operates with the idea that different religious and philosophical traditions share a common inner core and that esoteric wisdom needed to be transmitted through proper channels, often in a succession of initiations.³

While Faivre’s model made it possible for scholars to collaborate within a common framework there are a number of serious problems with it. First, Faivre is primarily concerned with Christian Europe, seeing “some Jewish, Islamic, or even far-Eastern religious traditions” as mere “visitors” in the West.⁴ Second, the rather inflexible model is based on a predetermined set of primarily Renaissance and Early Modern material, and does therefore not acknowledge the transformation of esotericism over time. Consequently, later (and earlier) phenomena are rendered “less esoteric” than their Renaissance counterparts. Third, the model has a strong intellectualist slant which results in practices being an ancillary concern, the elite culture of intellectuals being favoured while folk and popular expressions are all but neglected, and makes it legitimate to distinguish between “true” and “simulacrum” esotericism. Finally, Faivre’s model has frequently been misunderstood and erroneously used as a “check-list” to determine whether or not a specific phenomenon is esoteric. The model actually describes common elements in a predetermined material and should thus not be employed in such a manner.

Esotericism as rejected knowledge

Esotericism has both before and after Faivre been conceived of as a category of deviant or rejected knowledge. Deviance was highlighted as a core defining feature in the “sociology of esotericism” of the 1970s, expressed particularly clearly in Marcello Truzzi’s

description of occultism as a “wastebasket, for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way”, comprised of knowledge not accepted in mainstream religion, science, or culture.⁵ Such an approach positions esotericism as nothing more than a vague residual category, being both inescapably reliant on other more established categories and on historical and cultural preferences. For example, the theory of evolution would be as occult in fundamentalist Christian contexts as creationism in atheistic contexts, a heliocentric model of the solar system as occult in pre-Copernican Europe as a geocentric model today, and monotheism as occult in a Hindu context as polytheism in a Jewish, Muslim, or Christian.

While Wouter Hanegraaff’s more recent work on esotericism as a category of rejected knowledge may appear similar to Truzzi’s “wastebasket-approach” there are significant differences. Hanegraaff focuses on specific historical *processes* whereby a set of mostly unrelated and previously accepted practices and beliefs were cast as deviant and lumped together, thereby creating the category which we today study under the rubric “esotericism”. In particular, these processes of exclusion are linked to the Reformation – where both Protestants and Catholics accused each other having tainted true Christianity by incorporating “pagan philosophy” and heretic elements such as alchemy, astrology, and magic – and the Enlightenment – where e.g. chemistry and astronomy were somewhat arbitrarily distinguished from alchemy and astrology in the boundary work of the scientific revolution. It was only when this category had been brought into existence that it was possible to see these distinct and in many cases previously unrelated phenomena as representing a single “tradition”, which some then came to positively appraise as a counter-tradition that had been marginalized and unduly persecuted throughout the history of the Christianity. Understanding this dynamic adds depth and perspective to discussion about the popularization of esotericism in late modernity.

Esotericism as a distinct type of knowledge

Esotericism has also been conceived of as dealing with distinct types of knowledge claims. In an adaptation of Gilles Quispel’s work, Wouter Hanegraaff presents three ideal typical modes of knowledge in Western cultural history. Reason, faith, and gnosis can be distinguished by how the knowledge claimed can be communicated to and verified by others. Reason-based knowledge, common in modern science, is fully communicable and the validity of it can be checked by anyone with sufficient skills in the relevant discipline. Faith-based knowledge, such as claims regarding religious prophecy, is communicable but not verifiable. Gnosis-based knowledge, however, is both incommunicable and unverifiable. Such knowledge can only be accessed by experiencing it, often by entering “altered states of consciousness”, and any discussion of it can only be in metaphors.⁶

Kocku von Stuckrad regards the esoteric as an “element of discourse” that consists of “*claims* to ‘real’ or absolute knowledge and the *means* of making this knowledge available”. Von Stuckrad further contends that while the specific means of making esoteric knowledge available may vary considerably, ideas of knowledge mediated by

“higher” beings or gained through personal experience are common.⁷ As Hanegraaff notes, however, commonly esoteric discourse is revolves around the *pursuit* of higher knowledge rather than the claim to possess it.⁸

Approaches focused esotericism as a specific type of knowledge are useful in demonstrating that esoteric discourse is present not only in religion but also in fields such as art, science, and politics. For example, reason-, faith-, and gnosis-based knowledge claims are not limited to the fields that they are most common in nor are they isolated from each other. Gnosis-based claims can also be found in religion, faith-based claims in science, and reason-based claims in occult doctrines.

Esotericism and secrecy

Esotericism is in the common understanding often linked to secret or obscured knowledge. Along these lines, sociologists of esotericism in the 1970s defined esoteric knowledge as “secret knowledge of the reality of things... to a relatively small number of persons”, clarifying that “[a]t the heart of esoteric knowledge, is its concealment from public dissemination, from the gaze of the profane or uninitiated”. Consequently, “esoteric knowledge” is contrasted to the “exoteric knowledge” available to the uninitiated.⁹ However, historically the phenomena that are today studied under the rubric “esotericism” were not “concealed from public dissemination”, and thus historians of Western esotericism do not generally consider secrecy to be a core element. Also, as discussed earlier, scholars of Western esotericism commonly recognize that the idea of esoteric knowledge having an “exoteric” counterpart is an element of emic discourse rather than a sustainable scholarly perspective. However, secrecy in a non-literal meaning does certainly play a role in esotericism. Esoteric knowledge is of an experiential sort, and the “secrets” of e.g. Masonic initiation lie not in some secret and inaccessible Masonic documents (which have in fact been published numerous times and are readily available to the public) but in the very process of initiation. The “dialectic of the hidden and revealed”, i.e. the *rhetoric* of secrecy, is important in much esoteric discourse, but it can be claimed that the *revelation* of purported secrets, the unveiling of “hidden knowledge”, is much more essential than keeping them.¹⁰

Western Esotericism

In contrast to most non-specialist approaches, specialist scholarship presents esotericism as a distinctly *Western* phenomenon. Partly, the vocality of asserting the Westernness of esotericism derives from the fact that esoteric phenomena were for a very long time regarded as unworthy of scholarly attention, with the consequence that the study of them was left in the hands of amateur scholars who often held overly pro- or anti-esoteric sentiments. Many commentators in the field bought wholeheartedly into the discourse of esotericism as the perennial inner tradition at the core of widely diverse

religions from the different corners of the world. Thus, in order to professionalize and legitimize the study of esotericism in the eyes of the scholarly community steps needed to be taken to distinguish the new scholarly approaches from the amateur scholarship that had preceded it. Mainly, though, the historians who pioneered the study of Western esotericism were interested in detailing specific historical developments rather than projecting a universally applicable analytical category that could be used in cross-cultural comparisons. The qualifier “Western” is problematic as it has received almost no scholarly explication, though. Many scholars have chosen to exclude Jewish and Islamic (not to mention European pre-Christian) sources and phenomena, other than as potential inspirations, and it might in these cases be more proper to talk of Christian esotericism. The problems amass when it comes to a modernity characterized by globalization and transnational connections, where European and North American esotericism is both influenced by and influences developments in other parts of the world.

If there is a distinctly Western esotericism, though, could it then be legitimate to talk of an “Eastern esotericism”, and could cross-cultural comparative studies be possible? The answer depends on which scholarly approach one takes. While it is certainly of interest to study unrelated phenomena that share structural similarities, it might be best, for the sake of clarity, to use a term other than “esotericism” for historically unrelated non-European/-North American phenomena and developments.

Esotericism and Occultism

The terms esotericism and occultism are often used interchangeably by non-experts. In the sociology of esotericism in the 1970s Edward Tiryakian made attempts to distinguish the two in a theory-practice divide. Esotericism stood for the theory and occultism for the practice. However, in recognizing the difficulties in separating esoteric theory from occult practice, as esoteric knowledge is at its foundation “of a participatory sort”, Tiryakian himself demonstrates the futility of such a division.¹¹

In the study of Western esotericism the two terms are distinguished along different lines. Esotericism is the parent category and occultism a particular development within it. Wouter Hanegraaff uses “occultism” as an analytical category “which 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”.¹² Other scholars instead use the term “occultism” in a more restricted sense to refer to a specific esoteric current that emerged in the mid nineteenth century and was closely connected to ritual magic and initiatory societies.¹³ In both cases the key ingredients are an emergent discourse on occultism as a semi-independent tradition and the adaptation to the modern secular worldview accompanied by a preference for science-like explanatory models.

The distinction also relates to two opposing perspectives on what esotericism is, “early modern enchantment” or “the (post)modern occult”.¹⁴ The former is the perspective advocated by Antoine Faivre, and subsequently by many other historian of

Western esotericism, and the latter by many sociologists and scholars of new religions. Both perspectives have their merits, but neither conveys the whole picture.

Esoteric currents as discursive complexes

As the domain of esotericism is both broad and amorphous there is considerable need to systematize the study of it by dividing it into smaller and more manageable segments. I have chosen to do so by looking at esoteric currents as discursive complexes. Discourse here refers to communicated ways of interpreting the world or aspects thereof, and a complex a collection of interdependent discourses in a specific combination. For example, in this framework the “neopagan current” is built on discourses advocating “the primacy of nature” and expressing “a longing for a pre-Christian past”. As another example, the “Left-Hand Path current” is formed by discourses on “the ideology of individualism”, “the goal of self-deification”, and “antinomianism”. In both cases the discourses are intrinsically linked. In neopaganism pre-Christian religion is regarded as nature-oriented, and nature is then regarded as important for those more interested in pre-Christian religion and pre-Christian religion more appealing for those who are primarily nature-oriented. Similarly, within the Left-Hand Path apotheosis is a concern for the individual, godhood can only be achieved by becoming a fully autonomous individual, and antinomian violations of personal (and sometimes cultural) taboos are both necessary on the path to apotheosis and something that is a natural outcome of increased individual autonomy.

This framework is useful in examining the interaction between different esoteric expressions. Discourses are, as all human communication, fluid and variable, assuming different forms among different groups and individuals. Two currents can draw closer to each other when a group or an individual finds both appealing, and they can then assert influence on each other to the degree where they merge to form a hybrid current. With time some discursive components may become less influential and a new current that is distinct from its parents is formed.

The framework also recognises the influence of “ancillary” discourses, i.e. discourses that have cultural influence but do not directly form constituting elements of any particular esoteric current. For example, since the late 1960s many forms of neopaganism have been strongly influenced by feminist discourses. In some cases, such as in Goddess Worship and Dianic Wicca, feminism has come to exert such a strong influence that it has become an integral part of the current.

Esotericism in modernity

Western modernity in general is characterized by differentiation, separation, and bureaucratisation of social spheres, institutions, and functions, the rise of secularism as a hegemonic discourse, and individualisation. Late, or liquid, modernity, then, rather

than representing a break entails a radicalisation of these modern developments, often with seemingly counterintuitive repercussions. Differentiation has progressed to the degree of fragmentation, leading to a de-differentiation where ever the smaller fragments flow into each other and form new and often temporary constellations. The result is that a multitude of different explanatory models are available for each occasion, leading to a relative destabilization of modern institutional expert systems. This is further reinforced by the intensification of individualist discourse that posits the individual as the ultimate authority in all matters pertaining to his/her life. All of this has significant transformatory consequences for esotericism.

Entrenched in the hegemony of secularism, many early sociologists prophesied the eventual demise of religion. In contrast to general assumptions, however, actual theories on secularization are complex, multiplexed, and deal with the consequences of a number of distinct processes of societal change. Such theories do not deal with the secularization of *religion per se*, and the notion of “secularized religion” is, in fact, an oxymoron. One of the themes that have dominated theories on secularization concerns processes of societal differentiation where religion is isolated in its own institution and separated from educational, political, economic etc. institutions. As a consequence religious actors run the risk of losing much of their earlier societal influence. This “decline of religion” is primarily a “de-Christianization”, affecting mainly traditional Christian institutions and interpretations, and esotericism in general is not directly affected. Indirectly though, the weakening of traditional Christianity leads to increased pluralism by providing space for both non-Christian expressions and unorthodox Christian interpretations, which directly benefits esotericism. Esoteric actors were increasingly prone to draw inspiration from non-European religions, a development that was both influenced by and itself influenced the budding study of religion in the late nineteenth century. This “easternization” has continued uninhibited into late modernity, where the amplification of individualist discourse propels the formation of increasingly eclectic mixes.

It must be remembered, however, that esotericism does not solely reside in the sphere of religion – in fact, during the Reformation it for the most part ceased to be an active ingredient in mainline religion – and secularization may thus affect certain aspects of it negatively and others positively. For example, the hegemony of secularism did make it compelling for esotericists to formulate a scientific rather than a religious rationale for their practices. This is particularly evident in “the occult revival” of the nineteenth century where magic was framed as a technology, spiritual progressed was envisioned along evolutionary lines, mechanistic-causal explanations for correspondences were introduced, and a science-like vocabulary and rhetoric was employed. An occult social sphere in the form of initiatory societies that identified with “the occult tradition” rather than with (institutional) Christianity emerged, and in the twentieth century metaphysical realities were increasingly being cast as psychological realities. At the same time as they denounced traditional religion, however, this new breed of occultists also criticized overly materialistic science. In late modernity, “post-secular” discourses that are critical of secularism yet dependent on the awareness of the

earlier hegemonic status of it drive processes of “re-enchantment” where spirituality-based explanatory models are gaining new currency. The scientific and the openly religious now combine in ways which were unforeseen in the earlier phase of modernity. Post-secular re-enriched esotericism does not represent a return to pre-Enlightenment times when science and religion were not yet separated, but rather a new development which while it may (though it need not) be “anti-modernist” makes use of modern science and technology and is unmistakably modern in its logic, functions, and forms.

Another core theme in theories of secularization concerns the privatization of religion, where religion is purportedly removed from the public sphere to instead become a personal matter for individuals. José Casanova has criticized this notion on the grounds that religion has since at least the Iranian revolution in 1979 been very much in the public sphere thanks to the news media.¹⁵ Similarly, esotericism has a very public presence in popular culture, having a far greater visibility in late modernity than in any earlier periods.

Contemporary esotericism is also strongly affected by the “compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” in globalization, which while not necessarily a distinctly modern phenomenon nonetheless has intensified in modernity.¹⁶ Few, if any, esoteric groups can be described as truly global, but many operate in transnational networks and certainly “embody a global orientation” in regarding the whole world as their arena of operation.¹⁷ Transnational networking does not only mean that people in remote areas of the world are in communication with each other, but also facilitates an atmosphere where the whole network is affected by concerns related to its particular localities. This process of “universalizing the particular” has its counterpart in the “particularizing of the universal”, as specifically local interpretations of group-wide issues are formulated.¹⁸ Globalization is a driving force in the “institutionalized pluralism” that some scholars see as a central feature of late modernity. People are confronted with a multiplicity of different worldviews due to mass media and increased migration, and as a result exclusivistic universalizing claims to truth become less maintainable, which in turn directly benefits the individualist-syncretistic approach which is inherent to esotericism. On a theoretical note, these processes put the very Westernness of Western esotericism into question, at least within modernity.

Advances in communication technologies play a crucial role in globalization by making “globe-wide connectivity” possible. It is far easier for relatively small esoteric groups to maintain globe-wide memberships. Furthermore, much otherwise obscure and hard-to-find esoteric material has become widely available and easily accessible through the Internet. The new media climate does not, however, only accelerate transnationalization, it also introduces new possibilities, gives rise to changed forms, functions, and premises of communication, and accelerates transformations set in motion earlier. The changes in mediation introduced with the invention of the printing press were considerable, and while not necessarily as radical, the introduction of new media and online social networking certainly is significant. Mediatization, implying a situation where social or cultural activities are “to a greater or lesser degree, performed through

interaction with a medium" and where these activities become dependent upon the media they operate through, is becoming a central social factor.¹⁹ The maintenance of transnational networks over vast geographically distances is made possible largely through the Internet, but at the same time interaction is dictated by the medium at hand. For example, for quite some time now many esoteric communities have operated solely over the Internet. In some cases virtual reality platforms such as "Second Life" are even likened to and approached as modern-day astral planes. In other groups, online communication increasingly becomes the norm rather than the exception for inter-member communication, with the consequence that face-to-face interaction suffers. The new media climate also guides people's construction and maintenance of religious identities, beliefs, and practices. Popular culture plays a significant role in this, and it has even be claimed that the late modern media climate has fostered an atmosphere where Christian culture is giving way to one informed more by the occult.

Esotericism and gender

When looking at scholarship on Renaissance and Early Modern esotericism one is confronted by an astounding degree of gender blindness; women simply appear to not have played any role whatsoever. That this would actually have been the case is difficult to believe as women played significant roles in nineteenth and twentieth century occultism. In fact, in comparison to the religious milieu of the time in general esoteric spirituality seems remarkable in the number of women who were involved in central roles and positions. The massively popular spiritualist movement was inaugurated by Kate and Margaret Fox in 1848, and many of the mediums and key persons subsequently involved were female. For example, Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899) founded and edited influential spiritualist journals, wrote key books, delivered lecture, and has been deemed "[o]ne of the most influential figures in the early development of Spiritualism in the United States and England".²⁰ She was also key in the formation of the Spiritualists National Federation (today Spiritualists National Union) in London in 1891. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) was one of the founders and the definite key ideologist of the Theosophical Society, and the Society has continued to be characterized by the involvement of several charismatic and influential women such as Annie Besant (1847-1933), Katherine Tingley (1847-1929), and Alice Bailey (1880-1949). Furthermore, the third and fourth meetings of the group that would evolve into the Theosophical Society were held at the aforementioned Britten's house in New York in October 1875.²¹ The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn featured many female members in prominent positions, over one third of the members were female, and during the initial years of the order more female than male members were initiated.²² This fits my observations on the magic order Dragon Rouge where approximately one third of the members are female. Some neopagan branches, such as Wicca, are projected to have more female than male members, whereas some, particularly Dianic Wicca and Goddess Worship, have more or less exclusively female

memberships. Similarly, “New Age-spiritualities” have been claimed to appeal primarily to white middle-class women.²³ In general, however, there is insufficient data to say anything more conclusive about gender balance in contemporary esotericism. There are very few studies that explicitly focus on esotericism and gender issues. Some notable exceptions are Jay Johnston’s chapter “A Deliciously Troubling Duo: Esotericism and Gender” in *Contemporary Esotericism* (2013) which deals with esotericism and queer theory, and Manon Hedenborg-White’s unpublished MA-thesis, *To Him the Winged Secret Flame, to Her Stooping Starlight* (2013), which explores gender roles in the Ordo Templi Orientis. My own work on the magic order Dragon Rouge touches briefly on gender issues and demographics, but does not pursue the issue any further. Similarly, Hugh Urban’s work on sex magic does touch on the issue of gender but does not explore it to any greater extent.²⁴

Esoteric groups, movements, and currents

Ever since the eighteenth century “occult revival” the number of groups with esoteric leanings has been steadily on the rise. This, combined with the fact that esotericism is not bound to any specific doctrinal body, means that there is immense variation in practices, teachings, social organization, and nearly all other imaginable aspects. Capturing that diversity is impossible in a chapter-length treatment, and rather than trying to do so I will highlight a number of different currents, exemplify them through a number of movements and/or ideologists, and leave it to the reader to explore other manifestations based on the examples provided here.

The Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, is without a doubt the most influential esoteric movement to have arisen in modernity. It was one of the first movements to popularize Indian religiosity in the West, its ontology, epistemology, and overall approach have become cornerstones of contemporary esotericism, and in its openness it helped make esotericism popular and approachable to larger masses. One of the aspects of Theosophy that have been most influential on later esotericism is its rhetoric of not being a religion but rather a movement dedicated to “the study Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science [and] ... unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man”.²⁵

Theosophy also spawned thinkers who have exerted influence well beyond the confines of esoteric groups. In 1909/10 the Society proclaimed the young Indian boy Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) as the new “world teacher” and in 1911 the “Order of the Star in the East” was formed to promote him. Krishnamurti dissolved the order in 1929 and distanced himself from Theosophy, but remained an inspirational speaker whose philosophy influenced a broad range of people such as authors Aldous Huxley and Joseph Campbell, physicists David Bohm and Fritjof Capra, physician Deepak Chopra, and martial artists Bruce Lee. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) resigned his post as General Secretary of the Theosophical Society’s German section in protest against the installation of Krishnamurti as a world teacher and took most of the

German members with him when he founded the Anthroposophical Society in 1913. Steiner was a prolific author, writing on subjects relating to most all aspects of life, and some of his ideas have received mainstream acceptance in e.g. Waldorf schools and biodynamic agriculture.

The notion of “ancient secret initiatory societies” lives very strongly in the popular imagination. However, esoteric initiatory societies are actually a fairly recent development and rarely particularly secret in any common sense of the word. The three “Rosicrucian Manifestos”, *Fama Fraternitatis*, *Confession Fraternitatis*, and *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, published between 1614 and 1616 in Germany, told the story of the mystical Christian Rosenkreutz who had received vast occult knowledge during his travels in the middle east during the fifteenth century and subsequently founded a secret society to safeguard these teachings. The entirely fictitious texts spread quickly and influenced important esoteric personalities to the degree that they soon came to identify as “Rosicrucians”, but it was not until the late eighteenth century and the German *Gold- und Rosenkreutzer* that an actual Rosicrucian society was formed. Self-avowed Rosicrucian societies abound today, the largest and most well-known of which is the *Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis* (AMORC). Founded by Harvey Spencer Lewis (1883-1939) in New York in 1915, AMORC today has lodges all over the world and its membership has been estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands.²⁶ The order does not define itself as a religious organization, but instead as an “educational charitable organization” where people are given the opportunity to “study the laws of nature in order to live in harmony with them”, leading to well-being on the physical, mental, emotional, psychical, and spiritual levels. The teaching of AMORC progresses through three introductory “Neophyte” degrees, or “atriums” into nine “temple degrees”, but as “the exploration of universal laws is truly a lifelong study” lessons and teaching is provided even after the ninth degree.²⁷

Freemasonry, the history of which is complex and convoluted, was widely regarded as a Rosicrucian society throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it was really only in the latter part of the 1700s and, particularly French, High degree Masonry that esoteric components were incorporated in any significant degree. Craft masonry operates with three degrees, Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason, but some regulated Masonic bodies may have additional degrees up to the 33rd. “Fringe Masonry”, a term somewhat belittlingly used for Masonic groups that are engaged in the study of the occult and are not recognized as legitimate Masonic bodies, overlaps considerably with Rosicrucianism. For example, the *Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia* (SRIA, founded in London in 1867) accepts only Master Masons as members.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Rosicrucian symbolism, Masonic initiatory structures, and occultist recasting of magic as a technique rather than a religious practice, coalesced in the form of ritual magical initiatory societies. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in London in 1888, was in the forefront of these developments and is without a doubt the order that has been most influential in inspiring subsequent developments. For example, the Golden Dawn’s use of the ten Sephiroth of the Kabbalistic “Tree of Life” as a model for its initiatory degree system has been

appropriated and adapted in one form or another by most later magical orders. The original Golden Dawn perished in the early 1900s in a series of internal and external conflicts, with most direct offshoots dying out within a decade. Nevertheless, there are numerous groups today that trace their pedigree to the original Golden Dawn and claim to be its true heirs. In 1994 David Griffin registered a trademark for the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in Sweden, and after years of court battle he and his group were in 2007 recognized as the owners of the trademark in the European Union and Canada.²⁸

Several individuals who were at one point or another associated with the original Golden Dawn or its offshoots have formed their own highly influential groups and/or published texts on ritual magic that have inspired later generations. Dion Fortune (Violet Mary Firth, 1890-1946) founded the Fraternity of the Inner Light around 1927, which in turn spawned Walter Ernest Butler's (1898-1978) *Servants of the Light School of Occult Science* in 1965, and published influential books such as *Psychical Self-Defense* (1930) and *The Mystical Qabalah* (1935). Fortune was very interested and well-read in psychology and her works are textbook examples of the psychologisation of esotericism.

Another example is Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), who is arguably the occultist who has exerted most influence on subsequent generations. Crowley was a prolific author, pioneered systems of self-initiation, and his uncompromising attitude and "devilish" public image made him an inspiration for modern Satanists (though it should be noted that Crowley would strongly have distanced himself from any such associations). Of all the groups that have made use of Crowley's material, either consciously or unconsciously, the Ordo Templi Orientis is the one with closest ties to him. Crowley was instrumental in the development of the O.T.O. and became the "Outer Head" of the order in 1923. After Crowley's death in 1947 the order became inactive, to be revived around the late 1960s and early 1970s by Grady Louis McMurty (1918-1985). Several O.T.O. factions exist today, but the McMurty-revived "Caliphatic" O.T.O. is the largest with a reported 3056 members in 2005.²⁹ The order is also the most prominent to feature sex magical practices.

Chaos Magick is a more recent development, disseminated first in book form in Peter Carroll's *Liber Null* and Ray Sherwin's *The Book of Results*, both in 1978. In the same year the two also officially founded group *Illuminates of Thanateros*. A second wave of authors emerged in the mid to late 1980s, exemplified e.g. by Phil Hine's *Techniques of Modern Shamanism* (1989-1990) and *Condensed Chaos* (1992). Chaos magick's amorphous and anarchistic nature makes it difficult to define the current in conclusive manner. In addition, spokespersons in the current pronounced it dead as early as in 1988, likely due to a perceived "solidification" of the current which diminished its dynamic efficacy.³⁰ To the degree that it is possible to establish any stable traits of chaos magick, it can be characterized by an extreme eclecticism which dwarfs that of its predecessors, an aversion to dogmas and the structured hierarchies of traditional initiatory societies, inherently subjectivist approaches and interpretations, and the goal to "deprogram" oneself from culturally acquired limitations. In the spirit

of subjectivism, psychologisation, and innovation, chaos magicians tend to regard the demons, angels, and other supernatural of classic ritual magic as culturally and historically specific representations of more fundamental cosmic forces. As cultural symbols change over time, some chaos magicians may, for example, consider Mickey Mouse to be a more powerful symbol of capital and wealth than Mamon, and thus choose to invoke the former rather than the latter in prosperity-focused rituals. A common technique employed in chaos magick is sigilisation, which in simplification amounts to creating an abstract symbol to represent some specific desire, meditate on the symbol, and “launch” it into one’s subconscious where it will direct the magician’s actions towards the achievement of the goal.

The Left-Hand Path is a magical current that is characterized by a dominating individualist focus, a goal of apotheosis, and the antinomian use of symbols that are culturally coded as “evil” – including such things as the figure of Satan (and other “sinister” metaphysical beings), the colour black, and the “inverted” pentagram. The current includes some, but not all, forms of Satanism. For example, Anton Szandor LaVey’s (Howard Stanton Levey, 1931-1997) Church of Satan (founded in San Francisco in 1966) fits the label whereas a group such as the Misanthropic Lucifer-Order (MLO, founded in Sweden in the mi 1990s and reformed as the Temple of the Black Light [TOTBL] in 2007) does not. The current also includes post-Satanic groups such as the Temple of Set, neopagan-influenced groups such as Dragon Rouge, and more directly Crowley-inspired approaches such as Kenneth Grant’s “typhonian magic” (as expressed in his three “typhonian trilogies”).

The Temple of Set is one of the prime examples of a Left-Hand Path magic order. Founder Michael Aquino (b. 1946) was a member of the Church of Satan from the late 1960s until 1975 when he founded the Temple.³¹ In contrast to the basically atheistic approach of LaVey and the Church of Satan, members of the Temple regard Set as an objectively existing metaphysical being. While more junior members may regard Set more as a symbol, entering the priesthood of the order necessitates an experience of communication with the deity. The initiatory system of the Temple is similar to the Church of Satan’s – though more closely modelled on the structure of the Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn – and consists of the degrees Setian, Adept, Priest/Priestess, Magister/Magistra Templi, Magus/Maga, and Ipsissimus. The fifth degree involves the uttering of an “aeonic word”, which means that the magician has “‘stepped outside’ the totality of the existing Aeonic formula [i.e. the dominant magico-cultural paradigm] to alter it in an evolutionary way”, and in the sixth and final degree the promise engendered by the utterance of the aeonic word has been realized.³² The Temple operates with the notions of subjective and objective universes. The former represents each individual’s personal existential reality and the latter the world of natural laws and collective norms, rules, and views of reality. These notions are linked to the Temple’s primary magical practices, Lesser and Greater Black Magic, where the former is aimed at affecting the objective universe and the latter the magician’s own subjective universe. The purpose of Greater Black Magic is to propel the spiritual evolution and transformation of the practitioner, but it will have repercussions in the objective universe as well.

Dragon Rouge is a Left-Hand Path group that was founded in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1990 by then only 17-year old Thomas Karlsson. The group's membership increased drastically in the mid 1990s – interestingly enough due to a series of derogatory articles in tabloid papers that focused on the purported “evilness” of the order – and began to attract a growing number of foreign members in the late 1990s. Today the order's membership has stabilized at around 400, of whom about two thirds are located outside Sweden. Although the order is notoriously eclectic, its philosophy and practice is built on the four pillars of “goetic kabbalah”, “odinic runosophy”, “vamachara tantra”, and “typhonian alchemy”, together formulated as G.O.T.A. The first of these refers primarily to the order's initiatory structure, which is modelled on the eleven kliphotic spheres, the negative counterpart of the sephiroth on Kabbalistic Tree of Life, thus representing something of a mirror image of the initiatory structure of the Golden Dawn. The other pillars relate to a penchant for Old Norse religion and tantric practices such as kundalini yoga, and practices aimed at gradually transmuting the practitioner into a deity. Dragon Rouge is distinguished from the Temple of Set in that it is firmly influenced by the neopagan current and its discourses. The order demonstrates a significant reliance on both the appeal of pre-Christian religion, mainly but not exclusively of the Old Norse variant, and the primacy of nature as the domain of magic. In addition, the order is strongly focused on “dark” feminine metaphysical beings such as Lilith of Jewish mythology, the Hindu Kali, and Old Norse goddess of the underworld Hel.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a mass-popularization of esoteric philosophies and practices, in the form of very diverse phenomena focused on e.g. holistic therapies, complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), eastern religious practices, and fringe science. There was no single dominant group or spokesperson that advocated these practices, but instead a large number of teachers, therapists, and “gurus” who offered their services to casual customers but also inspired others to become practitioner-teachers themselves. Dumbfounded by the disorganized nature of the phenomena encountered, scholars of religion formulated the notion of the emergence of a “New Age movement”. Problematically, the very diverse developments are projected as a semi-homogenous whole, while scholars across the board were, and still are, unable to provide sufficiently satisfactory clarifications as to what characterizes this “movement”. Attempts to do so range from discussions of what the New Age is not to the introduction of extremely inclusive lists of Wittgensteinian “family resemblances”.³³ Like “the occult” in sociological terminology, “New Age” has become a vague general term for phenomena that do not easily fit into any other category of religiosity.

It can, however, be asserted that there indeed did exist a New Age movement, but it was far more limited than the “New Age movement” proposed by many scholars. Exemplified aptly by Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980), the New Age movement is characterized by three primary discourses. The most central and significant of these is without a doubt the narrative of the imminence of a revolutionary shift in consciousness, on personal, societal, and even planetary levels – the coming of a “New Age”. If this notion is not present, it is – or at least should be – nonsensical to describe a group or a spokesperson as representing “the New Age movement”.

Significant secondary discourses concern the human potential for extraordinary, even supernatural, feats, and New Thought-discourses on the human mind producing reality. Together these discourses flesh out a world where a new glorious, spiritually enlightened age of humanity is on the verge of emerging, where both the world and individual humans reach new levels of being, and this new world is ushered by the realization that we ourselves create our phenomenal world. This New Age movement is what Wouter Hanegraaff describes as “New Age *sensu stricto*”, and its heyday was relatively short, with the movement emerging in the 1970s, achieving immense popularity in the 1980s, and largely dissipating by the early 1990s.³⁴ The current did not die out, however, and it does rear its head from time to time. A reasonably recent example is Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* which achieved considerable popularity in the mid 2000s when it was endorsed by Oprah Winfrey.

Esotericism and popular culture

Many of the definitions, descriptions, and demarcations of esotericism that have been detailed are concerned with worldviews and “seriously held beliefs”. Consequently they are not ideally suited for the study of esotericism in relation to a field such as popular culture, which is arguably one of the most important areas of esotericism in late modernity. One possible solution is to broaden the perspective to include not only “esoteric discourse” but also “discourse on the esoteric”. Another solution is to recognize, as has been done in terms of e.g. in the study of religion and popular culture and everyday religion, that esotericism can have many forms and functions, thus negating the need to distinguish between “real” and “simulacrum” esotericism.

Christopher Partridge’s research on “occulture” is pioneering in the exploration of the roles and functions of the esoteric in contemporary cultural and religious change. Occulture is not a distinct form of religiosity, it is “the spiritual/mythic/paranormal background knowledge that informs the plausibility structures of Westerners”, and it includes, among other things, many “beliefs and practices associated with esotericism”.³⁵ Partridge’s approach is particularly powerful in combination with Wouter Hanegraaff’s perspectives on the creation of esotericism as a category of rejected knowledge. The latter sheds light on processes of formation and marginalization and the former then examines the processes whereby this manufactured category and its content is popularized and comes to function as a cultural reservoir used in the construction of beliefs, practices, and identities. A drawback with Partridge’s approach is that it does not go in depth into what exactly esotericism is, but this also means that the approach can successfully be combined with a number of more detailed definitions.

Partridge attributes a pivotal role to mass media, popular culture, and consumerism, as occulture “is constantly feeding and being fed by popular culture”.³⁶ In an age in which conventional institutional Christianity is losing ground, occulture, not as a specific form of religiosity but “the spiritual/mythic/paranormal background knowledge that informs the plausibility structures of Westerners”, is increasingly gaining

ground.³⁷ This means that some religious orientations that might earlier have been regarded as being deviant are now becoming mainstreamed.

Black Metal

Heavy Metal has since its inception in the late 1960s to early 1970s engaged esoteric subjects and themes. In many of the Extreme Metal genres that emerged in the 1980s, such as Death, Doom, and Black Metal, engagements with the esoteric were taken to new levels. I will here look at the most notorious of Extreme Metal genres, Black Metal, and specifically in its Norwegian “second wave” in the early 1990s. Early Norwegian Black Metal was characterized by a Heathen “longing for a pre-Christian past in the long-long ago”. Although certainly anti-Christian from the start, with numerous allusions to the Devil, self-identification of the scene as specifically Satanic was propelled by a media fuelled moral panic starting in 1992, with outsider descriptions of Black Metal as Satanic being adopted by scene members. The rhetoric of Black Metal being “more than just music” was present already in the Norwegian “second wave”, but a “Ritual Black Metal”-scene with bands that have direct connections to esoteric orders and explicitly frame their artistic activities as esoteric practice emerged only in the 2000s. In Sweden this scene is represented by bands such as Dissection and Watain – with connections to MLO/TOTBL – and Saturnalia Temple and Ofermod – with connections to Dragon Rouge – and the Metal festivals Arosian Black Mass (in Västerås, 100km West of Stockholm) and Forlorn Fest (in Umeå, in Northern Sweden). The Ritual Black Metal scene is characterized by great musical diversity due to as musical qualifiers being secondary to esoteric content, an attitude demonstrated exemplified by Mika Hakola of Ofermod: “I am also very fond of bands such as Saturnalia Temple, JATAO [Jess and the Ancient Ones], Ghost, Therion and so on, but for me these bands are Black/Death as the lyrics determine the genre”.³⁸

The band Dissection pioneered the ethos that would come to characterize the Ritual Black Metal scene. Band leader Jon Nödtveidt (1975-2006) was closely associated with MLO since the founding of the order around 1995, but his dedication to the order’s teachings deepened considerably during his incarceration for being accessory to murder from 1997 to 2004. He came to align his band with the “anti-cosmic” philosophy of MLO, with the statement “Dissection is the sonic propaganda unit of MLO” added to the 2006 reissue of the 1995 album *Storm of the Light’s Bane* (Icarus). In 2006 Nödtveidt released the band’s last album *Reinkaos* (Black Horizon Music), arranged a massive final concert, gave a last interview in which he in well-known Black Metal metaphors indicated that he was about to end his mortal existence, and committed ritual suicide in line with MLO’s teachings about physical existence being a prison to escape from. Several musicians who were involved in the last incarnation of Dissection are today active in Watain, one of the most popular Black Metal bands in Sweden. While Watain does not have the same connections to MLO as Dissection, lead singer Erik Danielsson praises the order,³⁹ and the band embodies the Ritual Black Metal approach in describing its performances as “live rituals”, holy communion, and divine, and the band itself as a symbol of esoteric self-creation.

The two most important Dragon Rouge-inspired Ritual Black Metal bands in Sweden are Saturnalia Temple and Ofermod. The former is led by Tommie Eriksson who is an active long-time member of the order, even having published a book on its teachings and practice. In contrast to most other bands in the scene, Saturnalia Temple's first album *UR* (PsycheDOOMelic, 2008) is relatively free from obvious magical sigils or symbols. The second album, *Aion of Drakon* (PsycheDOOMelic, 2011), does, however, include plenty of symbols/sigils on the cover and also clearly references Dragon Rouge in its title. On both albums the lyrics deal with initiation and are very similar to ritual magical texts familiar in the Dragon Rouge context. Ofermod is much more explicit in its treatment of Dragon Rouge-related themes, with the 2008 album *Tiamtū* (NoEvDia/Ajna Offensive) containing plenty of "Demon sigils drawn by frater B.A.B.A, sorore Ararita and sorore A.J for ritual purposes and qliphotic invocations...", and the songs being described as ceremonies "lead [sic] by frater B.A.B.A (Michayah Belfagor), Master of ceremony".⁴⁰ On the follow-up *Thaumiel* (Spinefarm Records, 2012) the lyrics are written by both band leader Hakola and several other members of Dragon Rouge, and each song is accompanied by a sigil created by the author of the lyrics in question. Hakola describes the album artwork as "the visual grimoire" and the album as a whole as "a grimoire that deals with Samael".⁴¹ The title itself is named after a kliphotic sphere, referencing the Dragon Rouge initiatory structure.

Comic books

Superhero comics have been described as occult fiction due to their similarity and relation to occult novels of the 1800s and UFO magazines of the 1950s, with all three genres having in common the theme of science- and technology-fuelled evolution of humanity, resulting in the creation of perfected and in essence deified human beings. Explicit esoteric themes were present in the 1970s "bronze age" of comics, with horror titles such as *Werewolf by Night* (Marvel Comics, 1972-1975), *Ghost Rider* (Marvel Comics, 1973-1983), and *Swamp Thing* (1971, 1972-1976), and the early 1980s saw a virtual explosion of more adult-oriented comic books that dealt with esoteric subject matter. The character John Constantine, introduced in issue 37 of *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* (DC Comics, 1985) and received his own series – *Hellblazer* – in 1988, is a prime example. John Constantine does not wield any superhuman powers but instead possesses vast knowledge of the occult arts and engages with non-human realms and beings by ritual magic or other conventional occult means. Other prominent examples are Alan Moore's run on *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (DC Comics, #20-64, 1984-1987), where the titular character is a plant elemental in contact with all plant life on earth (and later beyond) through the astral plane-like "the Green", and Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* (DC Comics, #1-26, 1988-1990), where the titular character through an entheogen-assisted Native American vision quest realizes that his power to mimic the abilities of animals are the result of him being in contact with all animal life on earth through the astral plane-like "the Red". Some comics make direct references to esoteric history, such as Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* where the character Roderick Burgess is

both modelled on Aleister Crowley and references to the mage. More contemporary influences from chaos magick are present in Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's *Phonogram* (Image Comics, 2006-7), where the lead character is a "phonomancer" who uses popular music as a magical tool to evoke the "goddess of Britpop".

Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison is particularly interesting. Morrison identifies as a magician and has published a text on his Pop Magical approach, and esoteric themes figure prominently in most of his work. More crucially, however, his comic book work not only reflects and expresses his esoteric interests but occasionally even becomes a tool for magical practice. This is most evident in *The Invisibles* (DC Comics/Vertigo, 1994-2000), which Morrison conceived of as a "hypersigil" – "a sigil extended through the fourth dimension ... an immensely powerful and sometimes dangerous method for actually altering reality in accordance with intent".⁴² Characters in series explain the nature of (hyper)sigils, as when McDonald's golden arc is called a "the sigil of the dark emperor Mammon" that affects the minds of people far and wide.⁴³ As a magical working the series was intended to both change the world and Morrison himself, and at a point when sales of the series were down to the degree of cancelled Morrison deplored his fans to engage in a "wankathon", "a magically charged global masturbation session initiated in order to increase the sales of *The Invisibles*", instead of simply asking his fans to buy more copies of the comic.⁴⁴

Science fiction

Science fiction may seem an unlikely place to find esoteric themes. However, the genre is ripe with examples of the pursuit of higher knowledge and extraordinary powers through science and technology. Furthermore, since the 1990s there has been a growing trend towards the inclusion of religion and the mystical as central themes. For example, in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (Paramount Television, 1993-1999) the alien Bajorans are a deeply religious people who identify Benjamin Sisko, the commander of the series' titular space station, as "the emissary" of their deities. Rather than being figments of imagination, these "Prophets" are an actual collective of extremely powerful beings who exist outside time. There is ambiguity as to their exact nature, however, as they are called "wormhole aliens" by most non-Bajoran characters in the series. The initially reluctant Sisko slowly comes to accept his new role as religious leader as the Prophets/wormhole aliens send him mystical visions and cryptic messages, are the cause of an evolutionary-transmutational experience he undergoes, and are even shown to have set in motion events that led to his birth. Sci-fi series such as *Babylon 5* (Babylonian Productions, 1994-1998) and the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* (several production companies, 2003, 2004-2009) similarly engage with themes such as religion, mystical visions, cryptic esoteric messages, and higher knowledge.

In the *Stargate*-franchise the treatment of traditionally recognizable religion is critical, with alien species having taken on the identities of deities in order to manipulate humanity. However, the franchise also operates with the notion of evolutionary transmutation in the form of "ascension", described in the *Stargate* Wikia as "a process

that allows beings to be able to separate from their physical bodies and to live eternally as pure energy in a superior plane with greater amount of knowledge and power”.⁴⁵ This process is made possible “once the brain achieves 90% synaptic activity”, and the individual then focuses his/her brain activity and learns “how to convert their bodies into energy”.⁴⁶ With ascension comes a number of preternatural abilities, such the abilities to control of the forces of nature, manifest material objects at will, possess non-ascended beings, manipulate the perceptions of others, as well as telekinesis and telepathy. The role played by knowledge is the most esoteric aspect of ascension in the *Stargate*-franchise. It is both something gained when ascending, and something that is essential for ascension to be possible in the first place. Notions related to initiation are also present: Ascended beings can “educate” lower beings in “enlightenment”, not by providing “facts” but by stimulating the being in question to “evolve” him-/herself; the initial process of achieving non-corporeal existence is but the first in a succession of “higher existences”, with each subsequent level bringing with it increased knowledge and extended powers; and human beings must be prepared to give in to death in order to ascend, borrowing from the common esoteric initiatory theme of “dying while still alive”.

Conclusion

The scope of contemporary esotericism is vast, including both phenomena that are easily recognizable as “religion” and phenomena that appear far removed from the religious sphere. In fact, one of the great potentials with the study of esotericism is the perspectives to examine the grey areas between the seemingly antithetical domains of the religious and the secular that it offers. The methods to study esotericism are equally diverse, and the amorphousness and vastness of the field means that the study of it should not be limited to any one discipline. Instead, transdisciplinary research and interdisciplinary collaboration is called for. Contemporary esotericism is, in many regards, unexplored territory. While certain phenomena have been explored, for example in the study of new religions and in pagan studies, there is as of yet no coherent framework within which researchers can gather in order to provide a bigger picture. There is thus both great potential and equally great challenges in the study of contemporary esotericism, but most of all great possibilities to boldly go where no one has gone before.

Summary

- Esotericism as a concept is difficult to define, much due it being used in numerous different and often contradictory ways. A perspective that was common earlier but that has been all but abandoned as viable in modern scholarship is that esotericism constitutes the common inner core of many or all religions. In a more recent approach esotericism was regarded as a worldview characterized by belief in correspondences and a living nature, trust in the faculty of imagination as key

to higher knowledge, and the experience of spiritual transmutation. More recent approaches regard esotericism as a collective term for practices and beliefs that have been rejected in a number of modernity's social processes (chiefly the protestant reformation and the scientific revolution), or as a specific type of experiential knowledge, the attainment of which brings enlightenment. It is important to note that esoteric thought is not something found only on the religious arena, but rather something that exists arenas such as science as well.

- Secrecy is an integral part of esotericism, though not in the sense of esoteric teachings or groups being secret in any conventional way. Rather, esoteric discourse revolves around the interplay of the hidden and the revealed, with the revelation of hidden knowledge being of central importance.
- In contemporary research esotericism is commonly identified as a distinctly *Western* phenomenon, formed in specific European historical processes. Thus there is no comparable *Eastern* esotericism. Culturally distinct phenomena may appear similar, but this should not be taken to mean that the similarities are more than superficial or that a historical relation exists.
- The processes of modernity affected esotericism immensely. The rise of secularism weakened traditional religion, which in turn allowed alternative religious expressions to gain ground. In the need to adapt to the new scientific worldview, and to bridge the chasm between science and religion, occultism arose as "scientified" form of esotericism. With intensified globalization esoteric groups are increasingly borrowing from non-European religions, but in the process the Westernness of Western esotericism is put into question.
- There is a huge diversity in the forms of esoteric expression, with incalculable numbers of often very small groups expounding their specific forms. Some of the most influential groups are the Theosophical Society (1875), Freemasonry and Fringe Masonry (late 1700s), and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1888). Modern esoteric groups are characterized by an extreme eclecticism in which bits and pieces of a multitude of different religious and philosophical traditions are combined to form new wholes.
- One of the social fields in which esotericism is most prominent is popular culture. Popular culture borrows from existing esoteric philosophies and practices in creating consumer material, but in turn functions as a cultural reservoir used by people to spread, redevelop, and reinvent esoteric ideas, symbols, and practices.

Key terms

chaos magick An amorphous school of magic originating in the late 1970s, characterized by extreme eclecticism, individualism, intellectual anarchism, nonconformism, and psychologized interpretations of esoteric notions and experiences. In contrast to

many other forms of contemporary esoteric magic Chaos magick eschews social organisation in the form of orders, groups, and initiatory degree structures.

Correspondences The idea that everything in existence is connected through invisible linkages, and that everything in the material world is a mirrored image of phenomena in the divine world.

(esoteric) discursive complex A set of interdependent discourses in a specific combination (see **Discourse**), where each discourse affects and is affected by the others that constitute the set.

discourse A particular way of comprehending and disseminating events, phenomena, and ideas, expressed in words, images, narratives, or other systems of communication.

imaginatio(n) In esotericism, the notion that the faculty of imagination is not merely fantasy, but instead a “spiritual sensory organ” that can provide access to higher knowledge than the common senses can.

initiation A process whereby higher, esoteric, knowledge is gained, commonly with the aid of more experienced practitioners. Often set in systems where knowledge is gradually gained in a succession of initiations.

initiatory society A group that has developed a standardized system of initiation, often where the membership is hierarchically organized on the basis of a succession of initiatory degrees. Examples include Freemasonry and many modern ritual magic orders.

kabbalah A school of Jewish mysticism developed in Spain and Southern France from the mid twelfth century onwards. Highly influenced by Neoplatonism, Kabbalah revolves around the notion that all human beings are parts of the divine creator with the goal to return to this source. A common symbol is the “Tree of Life”, consisting of ten spheres (which also represent specific traits of the godhead) that the kabbalist needs to traverse in his/her path back to the source. Kabbalah has become a staple feature of many esoteric systems, with Christian variants developed from the fifteenth century and occult, “hermetic” ones from the nineteenth.

occultism A distinctly modern form of esotericism that seeks to gap the bridge between science and religion, simultaneously criticizing materialistic science and dogmatic religion. In the late nineteenth century occultism, particularly in the form of ritual magic, was popularized in what has been called “the occult revival”.

occult Sciences A collective term for (particularly Renaissance and Early Modern) key esoteric practices that simultaneously studied nature and sought enlightenment. Astrology, alchemy, and magic are the ones most often featured, but it should be noted that historically these practices rarely had much to do with each other and instead occupied different social spheres.

occulture Occult culture; the large cultural reservoir of esoteric material that is used in the construction of specific esoteric beliefs, practices, and identities. The notion that

the current religio-cultural atmosphere is shifting from one dominated by Christianity to one characterized by the esoteric.

prisca theologia/philosophia perennis Two similar but distinct narratives on the nature of ancient, esoteric wisdom. Prisca theologia holds that ancient wisdom has left traces in current religion and philosophy but has largely been lost, and thus reform is needed. Philosophia Perennis holds instead that ancient wisdom is present in current religion and philosophy, and thus no reform is needed. The concepts were established during the Renaissance but are core feature of esotericism even today.

re-enchantment The notion that while secularization gave birth to a disenchanted world with no room for the sensation of the mystical and magical, the interest in these dimensions of human experience is growing in late modernity.

ritual/ceremonial magic A form of magic that relies on systematized rituals with standardized invocations, ceremonial officials, and symbolism. Standard for magic orders from the late nineteenth century onwards, often in the context of initiatory practices.

transmutation The goal and experience of purifying the soul or essence to the degree that it reaches the divine. The term is derived from alchemy, where the transformation of lead into gold was often considered to go hand in hand with a similar process of purification within the alchemist. In modern interpretations the notion of transmuting lead to gold has often been considered purely symbolic for spiritual purification.

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NOTES

- ¹ Faivre, "Questions of Terminology", 2.
- ² Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 398.
- ³ Faivre, *Access*, 14-15. On the significance of proper transmission, see Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*.
- ⁴ The fourth edition of Faivre's *L'ésotérisme* (2007), quoted in Pasi, "Oriental Kabbalah".
- ⁵ Truzzi, "Definitions and Dimensions of the Occult", 245.
- ⁶ Hanegraaff, "Reason, Faith, Gnosis", 138-141.
- ⁷ Von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism", 91-3.
- ⁸ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.
- ⁹ Tiryakian, "Towards a Sociology", 265-267.
- ¹⁰ Von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 10. Italics removed.
- ¹¹ Tiryakian, "Towards a Sociology", 265-266.
- ¹² Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 422. Italics removed.
- ¹³ Faivre, *Access*, 88-90; Pasi, "Occultism".
- ¹⁴ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 5-10.
- ¹⁵ Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*.
- ¹⁶ Robertson, *Globalization*, 8. Cf. Robertson, "Globalization", 451-452.
- ¹⁷ Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion*, 108-109.
- ¹⁸ Robertson, "Glocalization", 1995. Cf. Robertson, *Globalization*, 173.
- ¹⁹ Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion", 13.
- ²⁰ Mathiesen, "Britten, Emma (Floyd) Hardinge", 202.
- ²¹ Deveney, "Spiritualism", 1080.
- ²² Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 62-65.
- ²³ Hammer, *På spaning efter helheten*, 283.

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- ²⁴ Urban, *Magia Sexualis*.
- ²⁵ Theosophical Society Adyar, "Objects".
- ²⁶ Introvigne, "Rosicrucianism III: 19th-20th Century", 1020.
- ²⁷ AMORC, *Mastery of Life*.
- ²⁸ Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, "A Hermetic & Rosicrucian Timeline".
- ²⁹ Hedenborg-White, *To Him the Winged Secret Flame, to Her Stooping Starlight*. Hedenborg-White's information is derived from <http://www.thelema.nu/OTONumPublic.htm>.
- ³⁰ Duggan, *Perennial Iconoclasm*.
- ³¹ Aquino, *The Church of Satan*, 412-427.
- ³² Aquino, *Black Magic*, 31.
- ³³ For a critical assessment of the academic construct of a "New Age movement", see Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age*, 21-25.
- ³⁴ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 98-103.
- ³⁵ Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 1, 67-68; 187.
- ³⁶ Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary".
- ³⁷ Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 1, 187.
- ³⁸ Belfagor, "Interview".
- ³⁹ Woods, "Interview with Watain".
- ⁴⁰ Ofermod, *Tiamtū*.
- ⁴¹ Belfagor, "Interview".
- ⁴² Morrison, "Pop Magic!", 21.
- ⁴³ Morrison & Yeowell, "Down and Out", 16
- ⁴⁴ Morrison, "Invisible Ink", 25; Brother Yawn, "Interview with an Umpire".
- ⁴⁵ Stargate Wiki, "Ascension".
- ⁴⁶ Stargate Wiki, "Ascension".