

Kocku von Stuckrad. *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities.*

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Wouter J. Hanegraaff. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture.*

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Scholars of Western esotericism mostly agree about their subject matter. In Kocku von Stuckrad's enumeration it includes "gnosticism, ancient Hermetism, the so-called 'occult sciences' (notably astrology, magic and alchemy), Christian mysticism, Renaissance Hermeticism, Jewish and Christian kabbalah, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism Christian theosophy, illuminism, nineteenth-century occultism, Traditionalism, and various related currents up to contemporary New Age spiritualities" (44). But criteria to justify lumping these diverse traditions into a single category remain elusive and controversial. The books here under review, by two leading scholars, propose new frameworks for the study of Western esotericism.

In *Locations of Knowledge*, von Stuckrad argues that a fundamental structure shaping the history of European religion is "two-fold pluralism," the presence of alternatives in the domains of both religious identities and knowledge claims. He contends that this structure "is a key to understanding the role of esotericism in Western discourse" (23) and that discourse analysis is the key to understanding esotericism. Urging scholars to abandon the notion of "esotericism," he proposes the alternative concept, "esoteric discourse in Western culture," defined as "a secretive dialectic of concealment and revelation which is concerned with perfect

knowledge” (67). In part 1, the author lays out his analytic framework. In part 2, he applies it to various “locations of knowledge,” such as experiential philosophy, astrology, and Kabbalah, which were the sites of “discursive transfers” among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the medieval and early modern periods. In part 3, he looks at “transfers and interconnections between various societal systems in Western culture” (137), such as religion, science, art, and politics. The book is theoretically dense — “examples,” the author writes, “should serve theoretical interpretation” (xi) — and eclectic, drawing on Foucault, Bourdieu, Simmel, Weber, Homi Bhabha, Hans Belting, and Burkhard Bilger, among others.

Von Stuckrad’s approach has payoffs. Thinking in terms of religious pluralism leads him to treat Jewish and Islamic traditions as significant factors in the history of European culture. His treatment of the “dialectic of concealment and disclosure” provides a deeper way to think about secrecy’s function than a simplistic opposition to openness. And his claim that Enlightenment polemics transformed traditions such as alchemy, astrology, Hermeticism, and Kabbalah, which previously had been “integral parts of European cultures of knowledge,” into the “‘significant Other’ of post-Enlightenment Western identities” (200) is compelling.

In its larger ambitions the book is less convincing. In a work marked by constant theoretical reflection, the key category of identity is remarkably underanalyzed, rendering the book’s central thesis elusive. The notion of “esoteric discourse” has significant limitations. For example, it leads the author to interpret the *prisca theologia* as “a discursive strategy to formulate alternative genealogies of knowledge and identities that go beyond the usual revelation of scriptural traditions” (26), when its predominant function among Christian scholars was rather to reconcile pagan and Christian genealogies of knowledge within a biblical framework. More fundamentally, von Stuckrad’s discursive approach fails to explain the central transformation to which he calls attention: the relatively late emergence of a category embracing alchemy, astrology, magic, Hermeticism, and so forth, and the opposition of that category to Enlightenment modernity.

Wouter Hanegraaff shares the view that a coherent category uniting traditions such as astrology, alchemy, magic, and mystical philosophy originated during the Enlightenment and has functioned negatively as a marker of modern Western identities, but his approach is very different. *Esotericism and the Academy* is a brilliant intellectual history of how scholars from the fifteenth century to the present have imagined the domain now known as Western esotericism. Its originality and significance lie above all in the claim that, “Western esotericism is ultimately grounded in a *historiographical* concept, rather than in a common philosophical or religious worldview, a specific approach to knowledge, or a ‘form of thought’” (73). In accord with this insight, Hanegraaff offers a narrative based on a succession of historiographic paradigms. Chapter 1 treats the “ancient wisdom discourse,” encompassing the *prisca theologia* and related schemes describing the origin and transmission of true religion and philosophy. Hanegraaff sheds new light on this familiar topic by emphasizing how fundamentally debates over Renaissance Platonism and Hermeticism hinged on competing visions of the history of the

“wisdom of the pagans” and its compatibility with Christianity. He argues that, in constructing a historical framework to validate the synthesis of pagan wisdom and Christian theology, the architects of the ancient wisdom narrative, like Plethon, Ficino, Pico, Agrippa, and Steuco, created the foundation of Western esotericism’s “referential corpus.”

This sets the stage for the crucial second chapter. Building on the work of Sicco Lehmann-Brauns, Hanegraaff argues that a decisive turning point came in the late seventeenth century, when “anti-apologetic” Lutheran scholars, beginning with Jacob Thomasius, undertook a campaign to purify Christianity from the corrupting influence of pagan philosophy, above all Neoplatonism. At the heart of the unholy amalgam that the anti-apologists sought to explode was the ancient wisdom discourse, which underwrote the synthesis of Christianity and paganism with its bogus narrative about the history of knowledge. Hanegraaff’s key figure is Daniel Colberg, who in 1690 first articulated a “complete and internally consistent historiographical concept” — derogatorily called Platonic-Hermetic Christianity — “that connected everything nowadays studied under [the] rubric [of Western esotericism]” (107–08). The anti-apologists’ polemics begat two further historiographic paradigms. The “religionist paradigm,” inaugurated by Gottfried Arnold, rehabilitated many of the traditions that the anti-apologists condemned by positing “a supra-historical principle of immediate religious experience” (124) as the criterion for distinguishing true from false religion. The “Enlightenment paradigm,” which evolved out of the histories of philosophy written by anti-apologists like Christoph Heumann and Jacob Brucker, redefined the intellectual and religious traditions associated with the ancient wisdom narrative as “superstition” and “prejudice,” thereby divesting them of their “traditional status as players in the field of history” and transforming them into “non-historical universals of human thinking and behavior” (150). According to Hanegraaff, the Enlightenment and religionist paradigms, which shaped the study of esotericism through the twentieth century, are both ideological rather than empirical, using ahistorical criteria — inner illumination or universal reason — to separate the wheat from the chaff in the history of philosophy and religion.

Chapter 3 chronicles the nadir of the historiography of Western esotericism, as the success of the Enlightenment paradigm led amateur scholars to dominate the now-marginalized field. Hanegraaff presents excellent genealogies of three “loaded concepts” that have been essential to modern discourse on esotericism: “superstition,” “magic,” and “occult,” arguing that all must be rejected as useful terms of scholarly analysis, and charts the rise of the secret society as an organizing principle in histories of esotericism. The author sums up his argument about the polemical creation of Western esotericism in Weberian terms: “As a ‘waste-basket category’ of exclusion, it contained everything now seen as incompatible with a disenchanting worldview grounded in science and rationality; but by the same token, the category came to be reified as a positive counter-tradition of enchantment (or, eventually, re-enchantment) by those who felt that the evaporation of mystery emptied the world of any deeper meaning” (254).

The final chapter treats the evolution of the academic study of esotericism up to the present. Hanegraaff examines the work of influential scholars of esoteric traditions associated with Eranos, arguing that not only Carl Jung, but also Gershom Scholem, Henri Corbin, and Mircea Eliade, were religionists who pursued “the project of exploring historical sources in search of what is eternal and universal” (296). Turning to the emergence of “Western esotericism” as a scholarly field in the last quarter century, Hanegraaff focuses on Antoine Faivre, offering an admirably critical analysis of a scholar with whom he has collaborated and clearly admires. Hanegraaff demonstrates that Faivre’s influential definition of esotericism, although “deliberately presented as strictly heuristic and open to criticism and future revision, originated as a Christian and religionist notion of ‘true’ esotericism” (354). In search of the foundations of a viable scholarly framework, Hanegraaff instead invokes the historicism of Will-Erich Pecukert, Lynn Thorndike, and, most influentially, Frances Yates. Having passed through its religionist phase, Hanegraaff argues, the future of the study of Western esotericism lies with an empirical, “anti-eclectic” historical methodology. As a major participant in these recent developments Hanegraaff acknowledges that he may lack critical distance. Indeed, the reader can’t help but observe that Hanegraaff’s analysis of the historiographic *longue durée*, however persuasive it may be, culminates with his own preferred approach to the study of Western esotericism.

But that analysis is persuasive, not least with regard to the early period. With great learning and intelligence, Hanegraaff shows how and why Enlightenment thinkers created the category of esotericism on the basis of historically unsound assumptions, and, simultaneously, he convincingly recovers a deeper logic — concerning Christianity’s confrontation with “pagan wisdom” and expressed in debates about history — that explains how and why, already in the Renaissance, many of the traditions that would constitute Western esotericism came to be linked to one another. Among other achievements, *Esotericism and the Academy* is the most important work in many years on the meaning and demise of Renaissance Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and occult philosophy.

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