

Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion

In Search of a New Interpretational Framework

Often, when people nowadays talk of ‘esotericism’, they are using this word either as more or less synonymous with ‘New Age’, or as a term for movements that are based on a secret wisdom that is only accessible to an ‘inner circle’ of initiates. In academic discussions, however, during the past fifteen years, a field of research has been established that critically engages these assumptions and applies the term ‘esotericism’ in a very different way, namely as a signifier of a number of currents in Western culture that have influenced the history of religions in manifold ways. ‘New Age’ and secret initiatory knowledge are but two aspects of these traditions, and certainly not the most important ones.

In this essay, I will reflect on the various scholarly approaches to the concept of ‘Western esotericism’. I will propose an analysis that takes into account the manifold pluralisms that have shaped Western culture—not only in modernity. I will argue that the academic study of Western esotericism should be understood as part and parcel of a broader analysis of European history of religion, with all its complexities, polemics, diachronic developments, and pluralistic discourses. To make this point, however, I will first have to introduce the concepts of pluralism with regard to European religion and culture. Only after I have established this analytical framework, I will be able to put the study of Western esotericism into this picture.

European History of Religion: Complexities and Pluralisms

If we are to write the history of religions in Europe, there are basically two options. The first possibility is what I call an *additive* historiography, in which the main religious traditions—Christianity and its denominations—are described side by side with the historical developments of the ‘other’ religions in Europe, mainly Judaism and Islam. This is the

traditional form of approaching the history of religions in Europe; it ultimately leads to a church history with some sort of appendix that considers the minor traditions that have existed more or less in the shadow of the mainstream Christian religion.

In recent debates, a different approach has been suggested, which can be called *integrative* and which describes the history of religions in Europe from the perspective of religious pluralism. Quite against the common assumption that European history of religion is the history of Christianity and its confessional schisms, scholars of religion have begun to focus on the specific dynamics of inter-religious dependency as a common denominator of European culture. Religious pluralism is a characteristic of European history since ancient times, and not only in modernity (Kippenberg & von Stuckrad 2003a: 126–35; Kippenberg & von Stuckrad 2003b). It is the presence of alternatives that has shaped Western culture. What has also been distinctive is the presence of one particular religious institution—the Roman Church—that intended to take control over all aspects of the lives of people, legitimizing its authority with reference to a transcendental order (see Benavides 2008). Hence, it is the tension between actual alternatives and attempts at normatization and control that created the dynamics of religious development in Europe.

These alternatives include all three scriptural religions. Even during those times in which Islam was not institutionalized in Western Europe, it existed as an ideological alternative to Christianity or Judaism, as did Judaism to Christianity. It was part of a shared field of discourse. This marks the difference between ‘plurality’ and ‘pluralism’: whereas plurality stands for a simple coexistence of different religious traditions, pluralism denotes the *organization of difference*. Religious options alternative to one’s own are known, are a matter of negotiation, and constitute an element of one’s own identity. In constructing the ‘other’, both parties form a discursive unit. The organization of difference then materializes in ecclesiastical councils, confessional literature, constitutions, social group-formation,¹ and in political and juridical systems. In his masterful history of medieval Europe, Michael Borgolte notes: ‘If we want to understand Europe historically, we will have to acknowledge that its multiplicity has not led to a pluralism of indifference, but that its cultur-

1 These groups frequently transgress religious boundaries. For instance, the ‘Platonic Academy’ and the humanist ‘Republic of Letters’ are ideal constructions of an intellectual community that attract scholars with different religious persuasions.

al formations were adjusted, changed, and rejected in continuous mutual reference' (Borgolte 2006: 10, my translation; cf. von Stuckrad 2008).

But not only are the scriptural religions players on these fields: old and new forms of the pagan, polytheistic past, as well as religious traditions that are related to the names of Hermes Trismegistus or Zoroaster, likewise influenced the dynamic processes of European intellectual and religious history.² Esotericism illustrates how Christians (and others) became interested in alternative descriptions of the cosmos and of history that became part of their own identities, either within or beyond scriptural religions.

From a perspective of cultural studies this interlacing does not apply to the religious system alone. There is a second form of pluralism involved in European intellectual history. In two programmatic articles, Burkhard Gladigow has argued that it is the mutual dependency of religious, philosophical, scientific, and political reflections that characterize the 'European history of religions' (*Europäische Religionsgeschichte*, in contrast to the 'history of religions in Europe'). It directly affects the academic study of esotericism when he writes:

In the course of many centuries, philosophy and philologies presented—or revived—traditions that no longer or never had 'carriers' [*Träger*] (in the Weberian sense), traditions that were transmitted only in the medium of science. Renaissance, Humanism and Romanticism took their alternatives to occidental Christian culture mainly from the sciences. A revived Platonism could subsequently be closely tied to Christianity—or it lived on as theory of magic and irrationalism right into the eighteenth century—; Gnostic schemes and ideas of redemption could interfere with Asian religions that were imported through philologies; a monism could melt into a Christian pantheism or constitute a new religion. (Gladigow 1995: 29, my translation.)

In 2006, Gladigow has further elaborated this concept. He argues that a process of professionalization and pluralization due to new trends in

2 Take Zoroastrianism as an example: in his seminal *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the figure of Zoroaster in Europe, Michael Stausberg addresses Zoroastrianism—which was present in Europe as 'mere imagination'—in such a way that 'in addition to the analysis of the European view on Zoroaster from outside (*Fremdgeschichte*) the question of the religious or historical implications and explications of this process of reception' must always be taken into account (Stausberg 1998: 22, my translation).

philology and historiography has led to an inclusion and ‘probing’ of religious alternatives since the Renaissance. He now gives special attention to the process of ‘professionalization of religion’ that tests historical and philological methods on non-Christian sources. This leads, secondly, to a pluralization of the religious field. This process culminates in the Renaissance with a new ‘density of intellectual communication in Europe’, and in all of Europe.

A Renaissance prince that buys the *Corpus Hermeticum* and pays for its translation—later to become a canonical text of religious currents of the most varied disciplines—may be seen as a characteristic of the new phase of religious options in Europe. Not only do the ‘positive’, institutionalized religions receive the attention they deserve, but also the ‘undercurrents’, repressed patterns, ‘heresies’, ‘alternatives’, which could explicitly or implicitly compete with Christianity. (Gladigow 2006b: par. 1, my translation.)

This is an apt description of the complex dynamics that have shaped Western identities since late medieval times. My own understanding of the European history of religion and the place of esotericism within it owes a lot to Gladigow’s nuanced position. At two points, however, I would like to qualify his interpretation. First of all, Gladigow overrates the Renaissance as the ‘birthplace of modernity’. As with all labels for historical eras, the ‘Renaissance’ is a matter of construction, which characterizes, usually in hindsight, a specific period as something unique, as an event *sui generis*, highlighted in a longer time-span due to its particular qualities. The Renaissance as the ‘rebirth of the ancient world’ is an invention of special significance for the history of esotericism, as many scholars tend to speak of a kind of watershed between the ‘early periods’ of (proto-) esotericism and its ‘actual’ formulation in the Renaissance. This notion of the Renaissance as a distinct period, like that applied to the Enlightenment, has come under fire in recent years, as it stems from a nineteenth-century construction. Although it is true that for the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century the introduction of Hermetic philosophy was a decisive new step, we should not forget that Hermeticism had been a crucial element of Islamic philosophy and science throughout the Middle Ages, which also influenced Western European debates.³

3 A prominent example is the Illuminism of Suhrawardī. For a concise overview of the vast Hermetic literature prior to the Renaissance cf. also the entries

A second qualification of Gladigow's characterization of the European history of religion should be made with reference to Neoplatonism. Again, Gladigow is right when he says that the revival of Neoplatonic philosophy in Europe—first in Pletho and Ficino, later by the Cambridge Platonists (Gladigow 2006b: par. 4 and 12)—led to an opposition to established religious positions and that it provoked alternatives to Christian understandings. But the discrepancy between Platonism and Aristotelianism has in fact never been that strong. The 'Plato–Aristotle Debate' is a singular event of the Renaissance, and we should not adopt this binary position uncritically (Monfasani 2002; von Stuckrad 2005a: 49–52). What we find in the sources is a dynamic mixture of Platonism and Aristotelianism, transformed contingently in various philosophical and political contexts.

Analytical Tools for Interpretation

The construction of European history as monolithically Christian has been very influential during the past 200 years (see Perkins 2004; von Stuckrad 2006). Master narratives, even if they are based on historically dubious material, are capable of creating structures of power and societal realities. In fact, that is what makes a narrative a master narrative! The condensation of thought-patterns into social and historical structures is a key element of discourse theory.

Because of their often vague usage, the concepts 'discourse' and 'field' are in need of some explanation. I apply the term 'discourse' in the way Michel Foucault and others have described it, i.e. as the totality of certain thought-systems that interact with societal systems in manifold ways.⁴ 'Discursive formations' conceptualize the impact of and mutual dependency between systems of interpreting the world and processes of institutionalization and materialization. Talking of 'discursive happenings' elucidates the fact that discourses are themselves practices that influence non-discursive elements. Discursive relations are always power-relations, which means that the term 'discourse' refers not only to contents of frameworks of meaning, but also to instruments of power.⁵

'Hermetic Literature I: Antiquity', 'Hermetic Literature II: Latin Middle Ages', and 'Hermetic Literature III: Arab', in Hanegraaff *et al.* 2005: 487–533.

4 As a useful overview, see Engler 2006. On Foucault see Carrette 2000.

5 For the fact that scholars today are also players in fields of discourse, see von Stuckrad 2003a.

Another important concept is the notion of *fields*, which I apply in the way Pierre Bourdieu has coined it:

I define a field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation . . . in the structure of the distribution of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions. (Quoted from Jenkins 2002: 85.)

The field, hence, is a structured system of social positions, occupied either by individuals or institutions, the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants. Hence, a field is not an *object* but a *structure of relations* that is in constant change and motion (see Bourdieu 1992 and 1996).

A third concept that I apply regularly in my analysis is the term *interference*. This term stems from natural sciences and refers to the fact that *one and the same* physical—or, in our case, cultural—energy mediates through various ‘lenses’ or ‘prisms’ and is becoming visible in different cultural systems. In other words: the interferential patterns (on which see Tenbruck 1993: 35; Gladigow 1995: 29) that we observe in religion and other cultural domains are part of a shared field of discourse.

The terms discourse, field, network, transfer, juncture, interference, etc. are important analytical tools to come to terms with the dynamics of the European history of religion and culture, as well as with the function of esotericism within this framework. My position here can be seen as a deconstruction of strategies of *singularization* (see Smith 2004; Gladigow 2006a) and the formulation of an alternative model of interpretation that is informed by poststructuralist theory and based on pluralism, acknowledging the fact that the ‘Other’ is continuously produced by the ‘Own’ and thus part of a shared field of discourse.

To sum up, we can formulate three assumptions that are essential for the approach I am suggesting here: first, religious pluralism and the existence of alternatives are the normal case, rather than the exception, in the history of Western culture; second, Western culture has always been characterized by a critical reflection on religious truth claims and the interaction between different cultural systems (such as religion, science, art, literature, politics, law, economics, etc.); third, competing ways of attaining knowledge of the world is a key to understanding the role of esotericism in Western discourse.

The Place of Esotericism in European Culture

I will now turn to the place of esotericism within this conceptual framework. My point is that the study of Western esotericism will only bear fruit if it is linked to the general characteristics of European—and, for modernity, to North American⁶—cultural history. The power of interpretation in esotericism research depends on the ability to integrate various aspects of cultural analysis and interdisciplinary approaches in our model of explanation.

'Esotericism' still is a controversial term. Despite the fact that during the past fifteen years a cornucopia of contributions has led to the emergence of the research field of 'Western esotericism', scholars are still far from agreeing on definitions of 'esotericism'. This does not mean that there is also fundamental disagreement about the currents and historical phenomena that scholars think of when they apply the term 'esotericism'. Most scholars share the opinion that 'esotericism' covers such currents as Gnosticism, ancient Hermetism, the so-called 'occult sciences'—notably astrology, (natural) 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. All these currents are reflected in the recent *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2005), which indeed represents the state of the art in esotericism research. The Dictionary's editor in chief, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, notes that "'esotericism" is understood not as a type of religion or as a structural dimension of it, but as a general label for certain specific currents in Western culture that display certain similarities and are historically related' (Hanegraaff 2005b: 337). This, of course, is a very vague description. Even if scholars—for pragmatic or other reasons—agree on historical

6 The question of whether American cultural and religious history shares the characteristics of European culture, is much debated. While some scholars—notably Burkhard Gladigow and Christoph Auffarth—regard American cultural history as a 'subchapter' of the European history of religion, in my view the differences are in fact enormous. It is only since the second half of the twentieth century that we can talk of a shared cultural and religious space here, particularly through the reception of American 'New Age' culture in Europe. For early modernity and also for Romanticism, the characteristics found in Europe should not be transferred to North America.

currents that they want to study under the rubric of ‘esotericism’, it will be important to answer questions such as the following: what is the rationale behind the selection of currents? Why do we need a general analytic term to study phenomena that are apparently quite diverse (as, e.g., Hermeticism, Paracelsianism, or New Age)? Is it sufficient to justify the selection with reference to the fact that ‘this entire domain was severely neglected by academic research until far into the 20th century’ (Hanegraaff 2005a: ix)? What about other currents—such as ancient and medieval theurgy, Islamic and Jewish mysticism, or Romantic *Naturphilosophie*—that likewise ‘display certain similarities and are historically related’ to currents seen as belonging to ‘Western esotericism’? These questions do not undermine the pragmatic reasons for making selections. Rather, they indicate a need to constantly reflect on the biases and presuppositions that underlie academic interpretation.

Let us have a closer look at dominant approaches to Western esotericism today. Following the ancient usages of the term, scholars often referred to the esoteric as something hidden from the majority, as a secret accessible only to a small group of initiates. But many of these teachings had in fact never been concealed, and in the twentieth century they even gained wide currency in popular discourses, so that to characterize esotericism as secretive and elitist proved misleading (see Faivre 2000).

The most influential alternative understanding of esotericism was put forward by Antoine Faivre. He claimed that the common denominator, or the *air de famille*, of those currents referred to as esoteric traditions was a specific *form of thought* (French *forme de pensée*); a certain vagueness of this concept notwithstanding (see the critique in McCalla 2001: 443–4), Faivre regards the ‘form of thought’ as a characteristic way of approaching and interpreting the world. Faivre developed his characteristics from a certain set of early modern sources that comprise the ‘occult sciences’ (astrology, alchemy, and magic), the Neoplatonic and Hermetic thinking as it was shaped in the Renaissance, Christian Kabbalah, (mainly Protestant) theosophy, and the notion of a *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis*. According to this view, the eternal truth had been handed down through the ages by extraordinary teachers and philosophers such as Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, and Pythagoras.

In 1992, Faivre put forward his heuristic thesis that the esoteric ‘form of thought’ consists of four ‘intrinsic’, or indispensable, characteristics, accompanied by two ‘relative’ characteristics, which are not essential but which nevertheless occur very often. Faivre insists that only those currents are correctly labelled ‘esotericism’ that show *all four intrinsic*

characteristics, even if in different emphases (see Faivre & Needleman 1992: xi–xxx; Faivre 1994: 1–19). (1) The *idea of correspondences* is a crucial characteristic because it refers to the famous hermetic notion of ‘what is below is like what is above’. In the wake of the micro-macrocosm idea of ancient philosophy and religion, esotericists view the entire cosmos as a ‘theatre of mirrors’, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be deciphered by adepts. Astrology, magic, and spiritual alchemy all partake in this kind of interpretation. (2) The concept of *living nature* views nature as a whole as a living being, permeated by an interior light or hidden fire that circulates through it. Nature can be read like a book, but also interacted with through active participation, for instance in magical acts (*magia naturalis* in Renaissance parlance). (3) *Imagination and mediations* are complementary notions, referring on the one hand to imagination as an ‘organ of the soul’ and the importance of focused concentration in magical work; ‘mediation’ means the contact with intermediary entities that serve as informants and messengers to the absolute truth. The important role of angels, (‘ascended’) masters or divine figures in the process of revelation can also be described as mediation. (4) The *experience of transmutation* expresses the idea that adepts of esoteric tradition undergo a profound process of transformation and rebirth. Faivre alludes to the alchemical doctrine of death-and-rebirth to illuminate the spiritual processes within the adept.⁷ The two ‘relative’ characteristics are (5) *the praxis of concordance*, or the search for reference systems that show the common denominator of all spiritual traditions (similar to the idea of *philosophia perennis*), and (6) the notion of *transmission*, or the initiation of an adept by a teacher or a group.

The past fifteen years have shown that this typological approach, developed from concrete historical material, is very helpful in understanding the connections among seemingly diverse traditions, e.g. the philosophy of nature, mysticism, Hermeticism, Gnosis, astrology, magic, and alchemy. In addition, Faivre’s operational definition of esotericism (see McCalla 2001: 443) helped to overcome the simplistic dichotomies—of religion versus science, magic versus religion, and esotericism versus Enlightenment—that had so often distorted earlier understandings of the complexities of Western culture (see also Neugebauer-Wölk 1999).

7 The difficulties with the notion of ‘spiritual alchemy’ and its making up to represent alchemy in general (mainly through the religionist psychology of C. G. Jung) are discussed in Principe & Newman 2001.

At the same time, it is a characteristic of heuristic, operational definitions that they are subject to critique and change. One problem is the fact that Faivre does not always consistently employ his own typology. On the one hand, he describes currents as esoteric that do not fit all of his characteristics (e.g. Mesmerism, which shows only one characteristic, namely the idea of living nature); on the other hand, he excludes currents that nicely match his typology but fall beyond his scope of interest, such as Suhrawardī's medieval Islamic philosophy. More importantly, Faivre generates his typology from a limited set of sources—originating mainly from Renaissance Hermeticism, *Naturphilosophie*, Christian Kabbalah, and theosophy—and thus deliberately excludes aspects of the history of European religion that other scholars view as decisive for a contextual understanding of esoteric currents.⁸ In doing so, he excludes antiquity, the medieval period, and above all modernity.⁹ He marginalizes Jewish, Muslim, and 'pagan' traditions, all of which heavily influenced European esotericism. In the twentieth century, Buddhism and Hinduism have also left their imprint on Western esotericism. If we follow Faivre's typology, we end up in a circular argument: 'since esotericism is defined as a form of thought, nothing outside that form of thought can be esotericism' (McCalla 2001: 444). Although he himself would disagree, Faivre's typology in fact best fits what I would call 'Christian esotericism in the early modern period' or, to borrow Monika Neugebauer-Wölk's phrase, 'Western esotericism in a Christian context'.¹⁰

Although many scholars in the field of Western esotericism pay lip-services to Antoine Faivre's approach, and his enormous effort for the establishment of the field notwithstanding, there are almost no scholars who apply Faivre's typology without significant changes and adjust-

- 8 On Faivre's arguments against a 'comparative study of esotericism' that runs the risk of claiming a universal—essentialist—'esotericism' see Faivre 2000: esp. pp. 102–5; but cf. Hanegraaff 1995: 121–4.
- 9 'Correspondences', for instance, have a different meaning in the Renaissance and in twentieth-century magic. Another problematic term is 'magic': Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2003) compared the Renaissance *magia naturalis* and the 'disenchanted magic' of the twentieth century. As a conclusion, it is apparent that simple typological approaches to this shifting field of identities and strategies miss the point because they pretend a common denominator that is not found in the sources.
- 10 Neugebauer-Wölk 2003: 160. Faivre's religionist language—particularly in his early writings—is pointed out by McCalla 2001: 444–7.

ments. Thus, alternative interpretations of esotericism have been suggested. Among these, Wouter J. Hanegraaff's deserves special attention. In recent publications, he has developed his idea of a 'Grand Polemical Narrative' that according to him underlies the formation of the set of currents that today is regarded as esotericism by most scholars. As he put it in 2005:

[T]he field of study referred to as 'Western esotericism' is the historical product of a polemical discourse, the dynamics of which can be traced all the way back to the beginnings of monotheism. Moreover, it is in the terms of this very same discourse that mainstream Western culture has been construing its own identity, up to the present day. This process of the construction of identity takes place by means of telling stories—to ourselves and to others—of who, what and how we want to be. The challenge of the modern study of Western esotericism to academic research ultimately consists in the fact that it questions and undermines those stories, and forces us to see who, what and how we really *are*. Instinctive resistance against the breaking down of certainties implicit in such (self)knowledge is at the very root of traditional academic resistance against the study of Western esotericism. (Hanegraaff 2005c: 226; italics in original.)

Hanegraaff bases his analysis on the concepts of 'mnemohistory' that Jan Assmann has developed. This involves—as he argues in a subsequent article of 2007—what he calls a 'complex pattern of cultural and religious interactions based upon a "deep structure" of conflict between the dynamics of two mutually exclusive systems: monotheism and cosmotheism, and all that they imply. The logical incompatibility of the two systems has led to an endless series of creative attempts to overcome it' (Hanegraaff 2007: 120). Hanegraaff now focuses particularly on the discourse of *images* in the 'grand polemical narrative'. This is because, as Hanegraaff sees it, '[i]n these developments the status of images has always been crucial, because they are basic to the very nature of cosmotheism, whereas their rejection is fundamental to the very nature of monotheism' (Hanegraaff 2007: 120).

As a consequence, Hanegraaff even suggests a characterization of esotericism on the basis of these considerations. If we accept (a) that the 'grand polemical narrative' indeed is operative, (b) that monotheism and rationalism are the major pillars of Western identity, and that (c) both have problems with images,

it may not be too far-fetched to see a *positive* secondary response to the power of images as a major characteristic of Western esotericism. In doing so, we may make a cautious first step from a merely indirect definition of Western esotericism toward a direct one. We can make a further step by suggesting that specific persons and currents are more likely to end up being perceived as belonging to the 'other' if—for whatever reason—they exhibit substantial resistance against the normative drift of the dominant polemical narratives, and develop perspectives tending toward cosmotheism and toward a perception of truth as inherently mysterious and accessible only by a supra-rational gnosis. . . . [I]f it is correct that Western culture defines its identity on a monotheistic and rationalist foundation, it is reasonable to assume that to the extent that someone tends more strongly toward their theoretical opposites, he runs a larger risk—statistically, one might say—of finding himself and his ideas or practices censured and relegated to the domain of the 'other'. (Hanegraaff 2007: 131–2.)

That Hanegraaff is turning away from typological approaches based on content and ideas and that he instead explores the *structures* that underlie European history of culture is interesting and opens new perspectives. However, in my view the construction of what is pathetically called a 'Grand Polemical Narrative' is misleading. Claiming 'complexity' in the study of European history and religion certainly is correct; but the simplification and reduction to an imagined polemical narrative is the opposite of complex analysis.

To begin with, falling back on Assmann's conceptualization of monotheistic and 'cosmotheistic' mnemohistory comes with a price. The problem here is the vague differentiation, inherent in Assmann's interpretation, between historical data and tools of interpretation. Although 'mnemohistory' is presented as independent of actual historical developments, its initial introduction, according to Jan Assmann, is directly linked to historical instances, from the first monotheistic concepts of Akhenaton to the supposed imposition of exclusive monotheism by biblical Judaism (Assmann 2003). It can easily be demonstrated that this description does not correspond to the actual historical development. Consequently, Peter Schäfer calls Assmann's exclusive monotheism an exaggerated straw man 'that historically never existed'.¹¹ A similar

11 'Die Kategorie des Monotheismus, die Assmann postuliert, ist eine Abstraktion bzw. genauer ein Popanz, den es historisch so nie gegeben hat und dessen ge-

vagueness in the distinction between historical reality and mnemohistorical construction is found in Hanegraaff's approach, too. For instance, he claims that 'as a matter of historical fact paganism is and always has been part of what we *are*' (Hanegraaff 2005c: 234; italics in original; see also the passage quoted above).

But even if we accept that mnemohistory is independent from actual history, there must be sufficient historical evidence for the existence of such a memory (a problem noted by Schäfer 2005: 21–2). But many of the 'currents' within the field of Western esotericism have in fact never been simply neglected, marginalized, or banned as dangerous; they all have a complex and changing history in many different contexts.¹² If there is an effective polemical 'othering' in Western history, this process unfolded as late as the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. Put differently, Western culture, including its memories, does not only have a *problem* with images and idolatry, but has also notoriously been *fascinated* by images.¹³ In my view such a dialectical interpretation does fit the evidence much better: European cultural history is characterized by a dialectic of rejection and fascination *vis-à-vis* those currents that modern scholars regard as belonging to 'esotericism'. What can be dubbed the 'strategies of distancing' is a discursive happening that took place during the past 300 years.

Analyzed with the instruments of discourse theory, what Hanegraaff describes is actually a discursive formation, i.e. the concretization of discourses in institutions, such as the university and its specific research programs.¹⁴ We do not need the catchy term of 'Grand Polemical Narrative' to see that point. And we also do not need to fall back on an ultimately problematic construct of 'memories of idolatry and monothe-

dächtnisgeschichtlicher Wert außerordentlich zweifelhaft ist' (Schäfer 2005: 22–3). Schäfer also correctly notes the anti-Semitic potential of the distinction between 'monotheism' and 'cosmotheism' ('eine historische Fiktion, die auch gedächtnisgeschichtlich nicht gerettet werden kann'; p. 24); see Schäfer 2005: 25–39. A critical response to Assmann's Egyptological assumptions is found in Quack 2004.

- 12 This is true for Hermeticism, astrology (which has always been—at least to some extent—an accepted science), alchemy, Freemasonry, or Kabbalah. Even for natural magic a more nuanced picture has to be applied.
- 13 I analyzed one topic of this dialectic—the emergence of modern Western shamanism—in von Stuckrad 2003b.
- 14 This, by the way, includes the modern scholars who act in university contexts that are a product of a new evaluation of European histories and identities.

ism' to see the polemical structure of such a discourse. Perhaps Gustavo Benavides's observation is correct and none of these attempts at controlling the discourse has ultimately been successful in European history. Benavides notes that the large-scale processes that we see active in European cultural history 'seem to have functioned as homeostatic mechanisms'. And he concludes that 'in a seemingly inexorable manner, processes that seemed to push in one direction ended up generating a counter-pressure, thus bringing about their own demise' (Benavides 2008: 110). In other words, if there ever was a grand polemical narrative, it created the very powers that worked against it.

Esoteric Structures

As a response to these ongoing discussions, I argue for a model of esotericism that is capable of describing the dynamic and processuality of identity formation, as well as the discursive transfers between religions and societal systems. To begin with, and harking back to Bourdieu's understanding of 'fields', 'esotericism' for me is not an object but a *structure*. Furthermore, if the construction of 'traditions' or 'religions' are themselves tools of identity formation,¹⁵ we cannot stick to those constructions as an historical basis of defining esotericism. We will have to look at the discourses involved in the construction of traditions and identities (on the following, see von Stuckrad 2005a).

On the most general level of analysis, we can describe esotericism as the claim of absolute knowledge. From a discursive point of view, it is not so much the *content* of these systems but the very fact that people *claim* a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history. What is claimed here, is a totalizing vision of truth that cannot be subject to falsification, a master-key for answering all questions of humankind. Not surprisingly, the idea of absolute knowledge is closely linked to a discourse of *secrecy*, but not because esoteric truths are restricted to an 'inner circle' of specialists or initiates, but because the dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses.¹⁶ Esoteric knowledge is not necessarily exclusive, but hid-

15 On a critical evaluation of the term 'tradition' in the study of religion see von Stuckrad 2005b.

16 Valuable for this discussion is Wolfson 1999; see particularly Wolfson's introduction to the volume.

den. Principally, the revelation of esoteric truths is accessible to everyone, if he or she but follows the prescribed ways and strategies that lead to the disclosure of hidden knowledge.

Totalizing claims of knowledge can be found in religious debates—from the ‘Gnostic’ search for self-redemption to Suhrawardī’s school of illumination to Abraham Abulafia’s kabbalistic fusion with the divine to Jacob Böhme’s notion of *Zentralschau* and Emanuel Swedenborg’s conversing with the angels—but also in philosophical contexts, as the late antique Middle Platonists or the Renaissance Neoplatonists clearly reveal. If we look for esoteric structures in scientific discourses, we will detect them in the work of scientists who do not restrict themselves to heuristic models or to curiosity about how natural phenomena are to be explained but who want to unveil the master-key to the world. Such an ‘esoteric spin’ is present, for example, in John Dee (sixteenth century) who experimented with angels in order to learn about the end of the world; in the attempt of seventeenth-century natural philosophers at the court of Sulzbach to combine Kabbalah, alchemy, and experimental science; and even in some currents within contemporary science that aim at decoding the secrets of the cosmos or to find a ‘Grand Unified Theory’ of everything.

The next step in addressing the esoteric structures of Western history of religions is to ask for the specific modes of gaining access to higher knowledge. Judging from the bulk of esoteric primary sources, there are two ways in particular that are repeatedly referred to—mediation and experience. Here, *mediation* is understood in the same sense as Antoine Faivre introduced it into academic language, albeit not as a typological characteristic of esotericism but as a strategy to substantiate the claim for secret or higher wisdom that is revealed to humankind. The mediators can be of a quite diverse nature: Gods and goddesses, angels, intermediate beings, or superior entities are often described as the source of esoteric knowledge. Examples are Hermes, Poimandres (in the *Corpus Hermeticum*), Enoch, Solomon, the ‘Great White Brotherhood’ and ‘Mahatmas’ of the Theosophical Society, or the guardian angel ‘Aiwass’ who revealed higher wisdom to Aleister Crowley in the *Liber AL vel Legis* in 1904. From this perspective, it is obvious that the large field of ‘Channelling’—a term coined in the context of the so-called New Age movement—is a typical phenomenon of esoteric discourse, no matter if the channelled source is ‘Seth’ (Jane Roberts), ‘Ramtha’ (J. Z. Knight), or ‘Jesus Christ’ (Helen Schucman).

In addition to—and sometimes in combination with—mediation we can identify the claim of individual *experience* as an important mode

of gaining access to secret or higher knowledge. Again, this is prominent in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and subsequent literature, where a vision indicates the process of revelation. The complex genre of *ascension* to higher dimensions of reality—in the Hekhalot literature, gnostic traditions, and also in various mystical contexts, through meditation, trance, or drug-induced altered states of consciousness—belongs to the category of experience, as well. Repeatedly, the claim of individual experience of ultimate truth was a threat to institutionalized forms of religion, as the reaction of the Christian churches to these claims clearly reveal. Furthermore, the mode of experience explains (among other reasons) why in early modern times esoteric currents were more openly embraced by Protestant denominations, especially in the spiritualistic and pietistic milieus that focused on the formation of an ‘inner church’ through personal experience, than in Roman Catholic circles.

Concluding Remarks

Let me come back to the problem of definition. As scholars of religion we know that it is not a necessary precondition for establishing fields of research into religion to agree about a proper definition of ‘religion’. Much of the work in religious studies consists exactly of *reflection* on definitions and tools of analysis. My basic argument is that ‘esotericism’ presents a similar case. If we want to set up an academic field of research, we will have to extend our understanding of esotericism beyond definitions that are—necessarily—limited to concrete material, cases, and research focuses. At the same time, we will have to reflect on the implicit interlacing of various definitions and ask for general cultural dynamics that these approaches to Western esotericism reveal. The model that I present here is an attempt to reaching such a common ground. Thus, the study of esoteric elements in European history of religion generates a field of research along the lines of *Problemgeschichte* (‘history of problems’).¹⁷ The problems addressed by esotericism research relate to basic aspects of Western self-understanding: how do we explain rhetorics of rationality, science, enlightenment, progress, and absolute truth in their relation to religious claims? How do we elucidate the conflicting plural-

17 For the implications of Weber’s methodological approach on contemporary historiography see Oexle 2001: esp. 33–7.

ity of religious worldviews, identities, and forms of knowledge that lie at the bottom of Western culture?

If we answer these questions, perhaps we will not need the term 'esotericism' any more. If so, we can regard the term 'esotericism' as a Wittgensteinian ladder that once was necessary to get to a better understanding of historical processes. If esoteric dynamics are seen as integral elements of European culture, we can relinquish the term altogether and will start talking about constructions and identities of Europe and 'the West'.

References

- Allen, Michael J. B. & Valery Rees**, with **Martin Davies** (eds)
2002 *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Assmann, Jan**
2003 *Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus*. Munich: Hanser.
- Benavides, Gustavo**
2008 Western Religion and the Self-Canceling of Modernity. *Journal of Religion in Europe* 1 (1): 85–115.
- Borgolte, Michael**
2006 *Christen, Juden, Muselmanen: Die Erben der Antike und der Aufstieg des Abendlandes 300 bis 1400 n. Chr.* Munich: Siedler.
- Bourdieu, Pierre**
1992 *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
1996 *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Carrette, Jeremy R.**
2000 *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Engler, Steven**
2006 Discourse. In: Kocku von Stuckrad (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*. 4 vols; pp. 516–19. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Faivre, Antoine**
1994 *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
1999 The Notions of Concealment and Secrecy in Modern Esoteric Currents since the Renaissance (a Methodological Approach). In: Elliot R. Wolfson (ed.), *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*; pp. 155–76. New York: Seven Bridges Press.

2000 La question d'un ésotérisme comparé des religions du livre. In: *Henry Corbin et le Comparatisme Spirituel*; pp. 89–120. Paris: Archè-Edidit. (Cahiers du Groupe d'Etudes Spirituelles Comparées, 8)

Faivre, Antoine & Jacob Needleman (eds)

1992 *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad.

Gladigow, Burkhard

1995 Europäische Religionsgeschichte. In: Hans G. Kippenberg & Brigitte Luchesi (eds), *Lokale Religionsgeschichte*; pp. 21–42. Marburg: Diagonal. (Reprinted in Gladigow 2005: 289–301.)

2005 *Religionswissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*. Ed. by Christoph Auffarth & Jörg Rüpke. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.

2006a Meaning/Signification. In: Kocku von Stuckrad (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*. 4 vols; pp. 1180–6. Leiden: Brill.

2006b Europäische Religionsgeschichte seit der Renaissance. *Zeitenblicke* 5 (1). http://www.zeitenblicke.de/2006/1/Gladigow/index_html; URN: urn:nbn:de:0009-9-2866 (accessed 25 January 2008).

Hammer, Olav & Kocku von Stuckrad (eds)

2007 *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J.

1995 Empirical Method in the Study of Western Esotericism. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7 (2): 99–129.

2003 How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World. *Religion* 33: 357–80.

2005a Introduction. In: Wouter J. Hanegraaff *et al.* (eds), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. 2 vols; pp. viii–xiii. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

2005b Esotericism. In: Wouter J. Hanegraaff *et al.* (eds), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. 2 vols; pp. 336–40. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

2005c Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research. *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 5 (2): 225–54.

2007 The Trouble with Images: Anti-Image Polemics and Western Esotericism. In: Olav Hammer & Kocku von Stuckrad (eds), *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*; pp. 107–36. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J., in collaboration with **Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek & Jean-Pierre Brach** (eds)

2005 *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. 2 vols. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Jenkins, Richard

2002 *Pierre Bourdieu*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Kippenberg, Hans G. & Kocku von Stuckrad

2003a *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft: Gegenstände und Begriffe*. Munich: C. H. Beck.

2003b Religionswissenschaftliche Überlegungen zum religiösen Pluralismus in Deutschland: Eine Öffnung der Perspektiven. In: Hartmut Lehmann (ed.), *Multireligiosität im vereinten Europa: Historische und juristische Aspekte*; pp. 145–62. Göttingen: Wallstein.

McCalla, Arthur

2001 Antoine Faivre and the Study of Esotericism. *Religion* 31: 435–50.

Monfasani, John

2002 Marsilio Ficino and the Plato-Aristotle Controversy. In: Michael J. B. Allen *et al.* (eds), *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*; pp. 179–202. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Neugebauer-Wölk, Monika

1999 (ed. in collaboration with Holger Zaunstöck) *Aufklärung und Esoterik*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner.

2003 Esoterik und Christentum vor 1800: Prolegomena zu einer Bestimmung ihrer Differenz. *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 3: 127–65.

Oexle, Otto Gerhard

2001 Max Weber – Geschichte als Problemgeschichte. In: Otto Gerhard Oexle (ed.), *Das Problem der Problemgeschichte 1880–1932*; pp. 9–37. Göttingen: Wallstein.

Perkins, Mary Anne

2004 *Christendom and European Identity: The Legacy of a Grand Narrative since 1789*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Principe, Lawrence M. & William R. Newman

2001 Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy. In: William R. Newman & Anthony Grafton (eds), *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*; pp. 385–431. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Quack, Joachim Friedrich

2004 Perspektiven zur Theologie im Alten Ägypten: Antwort auf Jan Assmann. In: Manfred Oeming, K. Schmid & Andreas Schüle (eds), *Theologie in Israel und in den Nachbarkulturen*; pp. 63–74. Münster: Lit.

Schäfer, Peter

2005 Geschichte und Gedächtnisgeschichte: Jan Assmanns "Mosaische Unterscheidung." In: Birgit E. Klein & Christiane E. Müller (eds), *Memoria – Wege jüdischen Erinnerns. Festschrift Michael Brocke*; pp. 19–39. Berlin: Metropol.

Smith, Jonathan Z.

2004 Religion, Religions, Religious. In: Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*; pp. 179–96. Chicago & London: Chicago University Press.

Stausberg, Michael

1998 *Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit*. 2 vols. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Stuckrad, Kocku von

2003a Discursive Study of Religion: From States of the Mind to Communication and Action. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15: 255–71.

2003b *Schamanismus und Esoterik: Kultur- und wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*. Leuven: Peeters.

- 2005a *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. London: Equinox.
- 2005b Whose Tradition? Conflicting Ideologies in Medieval and Early Modern Esotericism. In: Steven Engler & Gregory P. Grieve (eds), *Historicizing "Tradition" in the Study of Religion*; pp. 211–26. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- 2006 Die Rede vom "Christlichen Abendland": Hintergründe und Einfluss einer Meistererzählung. In: Christian Augustin, Johannes Wienand & Christiane Winkler (eds), *Religiöser Pluralismus und Toleranz in Europa*; pp. 235–47. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- 2008 Review of Borgolte 2006. *Journal of Religion in Europe* 1 (1): 119–20.
- Tenbruck, Friedrich H.**
- 1993 Religion im Maelstrom der Reflexion. In: Jörg Bergmann, Alois Hahn & Thomas Luckmann (eds), *Religion und Kultur: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Sonderheft 33: 31–67.
- Wolfson, Elliot R.** (ed.)
- 1999 *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*. New York: Seven Bridges Press.