

Introduction

In 2010, historian Monika Neugebauer-Wölk showed that the noun *Esotericism* occurs as early as 1792. In that year, it appeared in German: *Esoterik*,¹ in the context of debates concerning the secret teachings of Pythagoras against a background of Freemasonry. In a context with affinities to Romanticism, it first appeared in French in 1828 in *Histoire critique du Gnosticisme et de son influence* by Jacques Matter (as Jean-Pierre Laurant pointed out in 1992). The term has since revealed itself, in English and in other languages, as semantically expandable and permeable as one likes.

To question its etymology (*eso* refers to the idea of interiority, and *ter* evokes an opposition) is hardly productive and often stems from a need to discover what “esotericism” in “itself” would be (its “true” nature). In fact, there is no such thing, although those who claim the contrary are many—these individuals approaching it according to their own definitions, in function of their own interests or ideological presuppositions. It seems more productive to us to begin by inventorying the various meanings that it takes according to the speakers.

I. Five Meanings of the Word *Esotericism*

I. Meaning I: A Disparate Grouping

In this meaning, which is the most current, esotericism appears, for example, as the title of sections in bookshops and in much media

1. About that first known occurrence, see Monika Neugebauer-Wölk's ground-breaking article (in *Aries* 10:1, 2010). As she explains, that term *Esoterik* was from the pen of Johann Philipp Gabler, who used it in his edition of Johann Gottfried Eichhorn's *Urgeschichte* (1792).

discourse to refer to almost everything that exudes a scent of mystery. Oriental wisdom traditions, yoga, mysterious Egypt, ufology, astrology and all sorts of divinatory arts, parapsychology, various “Kabbalabs,” alchemy, practical magic, Freemasonry, Tarot, New Age, New Religious Movements, and channeling are found thus placed side by side (in English, the label used in the bookshops is often *Occult* or *Metaphysics*). This nebula often includes all sorts of images, themes, and motifs, such as ontological androgyny, the Philosopher’s Stone, the lost Word, the Soul of the World, sacred geography, the magic book, and so on.

2. Meaning 2: Teachings or Facts That Are “Secret” Because They Are Deliberately Hidden

This is for example the “discipline of the arcane,” the strict distinction between the initiated and the profane. Thus, “esoteric” often is employed as a synonym of “initiatic,” including by certain historians treating doctrines that would have been kept secret, for example, among the first Christians. For the wider public, it also refers to the idea that secrets would have been jealously guarded during the course of centuries by the church magisterium, such as the secret life of Christ, his close relationship with Mary Magdalene—or that important messages would have been surreptitiously slipped into a work by their author. Novels like the parodical *Il Pendolo di Foucault* (1988) by Umberto Eco and the mystery-mongering *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown skillfully take advantage of the taste of a broad audience for what belongs to the so-called “conspiracy theories.”

3. Meaning 3: A Mystery Is Inherent in Things Themselves

Nature would be full of occult “signatures”; there would exist invisible relationships between stars, metals, and plants; human History would also be “secret,” not because people would have wanted to hide certain events, but because it would contain meanings to which the “profane” historian would not have access. *Occult philosophy*, a term widely used in the Renaissance, is in its diverse forms an endeavor to decipher such mysteries. Similarly, some call the “hidden God” the “esoteric God” (the one not entirely revealed.)

4. Meaning 4: “Gnosis,” Understood as a Mode of Knowledge Emphasizing the “Experiential,” the Mythical, the Symbolic, Rather Than Forms of Expression of a Dogmatic and Discursive Order

The ways enabling one to gain this “way of knowledge” vary according to the schools; it is the subject of initiatic teachings given forth in groups claiming to possess it, but sometimes it is also considered as accessible without them. Understood in this way, esotericism often is associated with the notion of “religious marginality” for those who intend to make a distinction between the various forms of gnosis, and the established traditions or the constituted religions.

5. Meaning 5: The Quest for the “Primordial Tradition”

The existence of a “primordial Tradition” is posited, of which the various traditions and religions spread throughout the world would be only fragmented and more or less “authentic” pieces. Here, esotericism is the teaching of the ways that would permit attaining knowledge of this Tradition or contributing to restore it. Nowadays, this teaching is principally that of the “Traditionalist School,” also known as “perennialism” (chapter 5, section II), whose English-speaking representatives readily use the word *esoterism* to distinguish themselves from most of the other meanings of esotericism.

Despite certain relationships of proximity, these five meanings evidently differ from one another. It is a matter of knowing which one we are dealing with when someone employs this “portmanteau word” (the same goes for other words, such as “religion,” “sacred,” “magic,” “spirituality,” “mysticism,” etc.). Taken in the first sense, it can refer to almost anything. Let us take the example of “mysterious Egypt”; still today, many authors take pleasure in uncovering an “esotericism” in ancient Egypt present in the form of initiations and sublime knowledge. Yet these practices scarcely existed in Ancient Egypt, except in their own modern *imaginaire*²; and even supposing

2. In this context, *imaginaire* does not mean “belief in things that are false or unreal” but refers to the “representations” that consciously or unconsciously underlie and/or permeate a discourse, a conversation, a literary or artistic work, a current of thought, a political or philosophical trend, and so forth. Thus understood, this term is sometimes translated as “the imaginary” or “the imaginary world” (German: *Weltbild*), but in the present book we keep the original French [Translator’s note].

that they are partly right (which it is permitted to doubt), it would never be a matter there of more than a form of religiosity present in many religious systems, which it would be sufficient to call, for example, “sacred mysteries.” It is no less legitimate and interesting, for the historian, to study the various forms of egyptomania proper to the Western esoteric currents because they are often part of their thematic repertory. Furthermore, through intellectual laziness, people often use the term *esoteric* to qualify particular images, themes, or motifs that they readily lump together under the heading “esoteric” (cf. *infra*, section I on the “unicorn” and similar notions).

The second sense encompasses both too much and too little (besides the fact that, when there are secrets, they are generally open ones). It includes too much, because the idea of “deliberately hidden things” is universal. It includes too little, because it would be false to call “secrets” a number of currents or traditions, as for example—to limit ourselves to the period from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century—alchemy, neo-Alexandrian Hermetism, theosophy, Rosicrucianism. In fact, for its greater part, alchemy (both material and “spiritual”) is not secret because it has never ceased to make itself known through abundant publications supplied to a wide public. Renaissance Hermetism (see *infra*, section II) is never more than one of the manifestations of the humanist current, which addressed all the literate. The theosophical writings have always circulated in the most varied milieux, Christian and other. Rosicrucianism of the seventeenth century is mostly a sort of politico-religious program.

The idea according to which the “real” would be in great part “hidden” by its very nature—third meaning—is present in all cultures, and, as it assumes various connotations in them, it is preferable to find a more precise term to define each one of them. Similarly, concerning the fourth meaning—“esotericism” as a synonym of “gnosis”—it can seem pointless to complicate matters by not remaining content with this second word. Certainly, a number of those who intend to speak of “esotericism in itself” attempt to find equivalent terms in cultures distinct from ours (in India, in the Far East, etc.); but the point is not convincing because the terms thus employed do not possess the same semantic charge and refer to very different meanings. The fifth meaning, finally, also designates something relatively precise (a rather specific current of

thought); at that point, it would be enough for the exterior observer to employ the term *perennialism* rather than esotericism (although those connected with this current have, of course, the right to use the second term). Notwithstanding, and as we have seen, they themselves prefer, in English, to speak of esoterism rather than esotericism.

For these various reasons, esotericism is understood (especially since about the beginning of the 1990s; cf. *infra*, sections II, IV, and V) in a sixth meaning for the majority of historians.

II. Sixth Meaning: A Group of Specific Historical Currents

Indeed, these historians, as we did in our first works on the notion of esotericism at the beginning of the 1990s (*infra*, section IV), have preserved the word through sheer convenience (it had the merit of already existing) to refer to the “history of Western esoteric currents.” These currents, as we shall see, present strong similarities and are found to have historical interconnections.

Western here refers to a West—a West permeated by Christian culture and “visited” by Jewish or Muslim religious traditions, or even Far Eastern ones, with which it cohabited but that are not identical with it; in this understanding, Jewish Kabbalah does not belong to this “Western esotericism,” whereas the so-called Christian Kabbalah does. Of course, this choice, which is purely methodological, does not imply any judgmental position whatsoever.

Among the currents that illustrate this “Western esotericism” (in the sixth meaning) appear notably, for late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the following ones: Alexandrian Hermetism (the Greek writings attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, second and third centuries of our era); Christian Gnosticism, various forms of neo-Pythagoreanism, speculative astrology, and alchemy. And for the so-called modern period, let us cite especially, in the Renaissance, neo-Alexandrian Hermetism, Christian Kabbalah (corpus of interpretations of Jewish Kabbalah intending to harmonize it with Christianity), the *philosophia occulta*, the so-called Paracelsian current (from the name of the philosopher Paracelsus), and some of its derivatives. After the

Renaissance, we have Rosicrucianism and its variants, as well as Christian theosophy, the “Illuminism” of the eighteenth century, a part of romantic *Naturphilosophie*, the so-called “occultist” current (from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth). According to some representatives of this specialty, “Western esotericism” extends over this vast field, from late Antiquity to the present (broad meaning). According to other representatives of this same specialty, it is preferable to understand it in a more restricted sense by limiting it to the so-called “modern” period (from the Renaissance until today); they then speak of a “modern Western esotericism” (restricted meaning).

This short book follows the second approach (restricted meaning), although the first chapter deals with the ancient and medieval sources of the modern Western esoteric currents, that is to say, the first fifteen centuries of our era. The reason for this choice is that starting from the end of the fifteenth century new currents appeared, in a very innovative fashion in the sense that they found themselves intrinsically connected with nascent modernity, to the point of constituting a specific product. They in fact reappropriated, in a Christian light but in original ways, elements having belonged to late Antiquity and to the Middle Ages (such as Stoicism, Gnosticism, Hermetism, neo-Pythagoreanism). Indeed, only at the beginning of the Renaissance did people begin to want to collect a variety of antique and medieval materials of the type that concerns us, in the belief that they could constitute a homogenous group. Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and others (chapter 2, section I) undertook to consider them as mutually complementary, to seek their common denominators, as far as postulating the existence of a *philosophia perennis* (a “perennial philosophy”). Real or mythical, the representatives of the latter were considered the links in a chain illustrated by Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, Orpheus, the Sibyls, and sometimes also by other characters. Thus, for example, after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, Jewish Kabbalah penetrated into the Christian milieu to find itself interpreted in the light of traditions (Alexandrian Hermetism, alchemy, Pythagoreanism, etc.) that were not Jewish.

Reasons of a theological order account, largely, for such a need to have recourse to ancient traditions. For a long time, indeed, Christian-

ity had preserved within it certain forms of “knowledge” that entered into the field of theology (or theologies) and related to the connection between metaphysical principles and cosmology (the Aristotelian “second causes”). But after theology had, little by little, discarded cosmology, that is to say, part of itself, then this vast field found itself appropriated, reinterpreted “from the outside” (outside the theological field) by an extra-theological attempt to connect the universal to the particular—to occupy the interface between metaphysics and cosmology. Many thinkers of the Renaissance tried to justify such an attempt by resorting to certain traditions of the past.

To that attempt is added, as a corollary, the idea of “revelations possible from within Revelation itself” (to employ the felicitous expression suggested by the historian Jean-Pierre Brach). In other terms, believers who adhered to the teaching of their Church could nevertheless benefit from a “revelation” not dispensed by the official catechism (“Revelation” as it is taught), but which by its very nature would be consistent with deepening the meaning and the content of this catechism. Those who exploited the certitude of this “inner revelation” tended rather to impersonal discourse, either by exhibiting a tradition to which they would have had access, a transmission of which they would be the repositories, or by affirming themselves graced with an inspiration come directly from on high. This idea is very present, certainly, in the three great religions of the Book (where it often finds itself challenged by the existing orthodoxies), but in the Renaissance era it is also a means of enriching an official teaching felt as impoverished—and it would remain very present in the history of modern esoteric currents.

Finally, these three areas of discourse (the search for a perennial philosophy, the autonomization of an extra-theological discourse in the subject of cosmology, and the idea of possible revelation from within Revelation) constitute, particularly the first two, an essential aspect of nascent modernity. For the latter, which then finds itself confronted with itself, it is a matter of answering questions posed by its own advent—and not, as is too often believed, the response of a sort of “counter-culture” directed against modernity. This remark is just as applicable, as we shall see, to the subsequent esoteric currents.

III. From the Religionist and Universalist Approach to the Historico-Critical Approach

To treat esotericism understood in this sixth sense (*supra*, section II) comes within a historico-critical mode of approach. We will return (*infra*, sections IV, V) to the ways in which it is declined; but, before that, it seems necessary to introduce another one, followed by many authors who also intend to treat the history of “esotericism.” This introduction will permit us, at the same time, to bring out some of the implications with which meanings one to five are charged.

This second mode of approach rests either on a “religionist” position, or on a “universalist” position, or again on both at the same time. The first consists in positing that, to validly study a religion, a tradition, a spiritual trend, and so on—and, consequently, “esotericism”—it is necessary to be a member of it oneself on pain of not understanding very much about it—hence the proselytizing tendency frequently evinced by the supporters of this position. The second consists in postulating the existence of a “universal esotericism” of which it would be a matter of discovering, of explicating the “true” nature; we can remark that, in this type of discourse, esotericism is most of the time synonymous with “sacred” in general, indeed of “religion” understood *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The simultaneously religionist and universalist position is represented principally by the perennialist current evoked in section I, which spread in most of the Western countries especially from the mid-twentieth century. It will be (chapter 5, section II) the subject of a specific discussion. The following are two examples of scholarly religionists. In France, Robert Amadou, whose work is abundant; his first significant work is entitled *L'occultisme. Esquisse d'un monde vivant* (1950). “Occultism” is here synonymous with “esotericism” understood in the second, third, and fourth meanings at once; despite his somewhat universalizing bent, Amadou distinguishes himself strongly, let us note, from perennialism (fifth meaning). In Germany, Gerhard Wehr, who limits his field to the Western world and attempts, throughout a series of high-quality monographs, to find concordances between Rudolf Steiner, Carl Gustav Jung, Novalis, Jacob Boehme, and the like, and who occasionally paints a picture of what is according to

him Christian esotericism (*Esoterisches Christentum*, 1975 and 1995). An example of a universalist is the academic Pierre Riffard, who has posited (in *L'ésotérisme: Qu'est-ce que l'ésotérisme? Anthologie de l'ésotérisme*, 1990) the existence of a "universal esotericism" composed, according to him, of eight invariables:

1. The impersonality of the authors;
2. The opposition between the profane and the initiates;
3. The subtle;
4. Correspondences;
5. Numbers;
6. The occult sciences;
7. The occult arts; and
8. Initiation.

Although admitting that this construction could lend itself to an inquiry of an anthropological and/or philosophical type, it would not be of much use to the historian.

In the intellectual climate of the 1960s and 1970s, scholarly philosophers and historians tended to see in the esoteric currents (as well as in various forms of "spirituality") of the past a sort of "counter-culture" that would have been generally beneficial to humanity and from which it would be in the best interests of our disenchanted era to learn. Belonging to this movement are a certain number of personalities connected with the Eranos group, such as Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade, Henry Corbin, Ernst Benz, Gilbert Durand, or Joseph Campbell. Certainly, the Eranos Conferences held at Ansona (Switzerland) from 1933 to 1984, of which all the Proceedings have been published, have contributed to stimulate the interest of a good part of the academic world, as much for comparativism in the history of religions as for various forms of esotericism. However, because of their mainly apologetic orientation, they have not failed to give rise to reservations on the part of researchers of a more strictly historical orientation, notably of those whose works bear on esotericism understood in the sixth sense of the term. This is also the period when Frances A. Yates (*infra*) described the Renaissance magus as a rebel opposed to the dogmas of the established Churches and, later, to the

pretensions of mechanistic science (although Yate's purpose was not apologetic in character).

Among the historians of esotericism understood in the sixth sense, it is appropriate to distinguish two categories. On the one hand, those who, very numerous, work on currents (movements, societies) or particular authors; their aim is not (which is certainly their right) to question the existence or the nature of the considered specialty as such; this is discussed in chapter 5, section II. And, on the other hand, the "generalists," who intend to study "esotericism" as a whole (of course, "universalists" like Riffard are in their manner generalists, but here we consider only those who adopt a historico-critical approach). They study it considering it either *lato sensu*, or *stricto sensu* (the twenty centuries of our era, or only the so-called "modern" period, which begins at the Renaissance; cf. section II). Most of the "generalists" adopt (following the example of the "nongeneralists") an empirical approach of a historico-critical type; at that point, it is not surprising that they prove to have a real methodological concern. In any event, they intend to distinguish themselves from the many works of a religionist character, including those whose importance they nevertheless recognize at least with regard to the "origins" of their specialty—thus, it is undeniable that the Eranos Conferences (cf. *supra*), for example, have contributed to stimulate the interest of the academic world in this same specialty.

The book (of a nonreligionist and nonuniversalist orientation) of Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, published in 1964, prepared the way for the academic recognition of this field of study understood in the sixth sense. With respect to this work, it has been possible to speak of a "Yates paradigm," which rests on two ideas: a) there would have existed from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century a "Hermetic tradition" opposing the dominant traditions of Christianity and rationality; b) it would have paradoxically constituted an important positive factor in the development of the scientific revolution. These two propositions are debatable, but the *Giordano Bruno* has nonetheless stimulated the lively interest of many researchers in this notion of the "Hermetic tradition" applied not only to the period of the Renaissance (studied by Yates), but also to those that followed it and that preceded it. In fact, her "paradigm" found itself supplanted

by another, introduced by the author of these lines (in 1992 notably, in the first edition of this little book; cf. *infra*, section IV).

IV. A New Manner of Constructing the Object

In examining the possibility of founding a new paradigm, we decided from the outset to differentiate ourselves from what “esotericists” or their adversaries, and even from what historians however not ideologically engaged, could have understood by “esotericism” (or, like Yates, “Hermetic tradition”). In fact, most of them have the tendency thus to refer to an “ideal type” (other examples of ideal types: “reason,” “faith,” “sacred,” “magic,” “gnosis,” “mysticism,” etc.), which they adopt at first as an *a priori* and to which they strive, in a second phase, to make particular phenomena correspond. Therefore, it was not a matter of constructing or reconstructing a hypothetical “esoteric doctrine,” for example, but of beginning by observing empirically (without an essentialist or apologetic presupposition) a dense series of varied materials taken in a historical period and a geographical area (the modern period in the West). It was then a matter of asking ourselves if some of these materials would have sufficient common characteristics (hence, in the plural) so that, as a whole, they could be considered a specific field. For this to have been, it seemed essential to us that there should be several characteristics—a single one would have ineluctably conferred a universal scope on the constructed object, which it was precisely a matter of avoiding.

In fact, a certain number of characteristics emerged from this observation. Taken as a whole, they constitute a construct (a working model)—that of the object “Modern Western Esotericism” (as it has been called at our suggestion). This object would be identifiable by the simultaneous presence of a certain number of components distributed according to variable proportions (in a text, in an author, in a trend, even though obviously a discourse is never only “esoteric”). Four are intrinsic (fundamental), in the sense that their simultaneous presence suffices to identify the object. Two others are “secondary,” in the sense that they appear only frequently, but they nonetheless confer a greater flexibility on this construct.

The four fundamental characteristics are as follows:

1. *The idea of universal correspondences.* Non-“causal” correspondences operate between all the levels of reality of the universe, which is a sort of theater of mirrors inhabited and animated by invisible forces. For example, there would exist relationships between the heavens (macrocosm) and the human being (microcosm), between the planets and the parts of the human body, between the revealed texts of religions (the Bible, principally) and what Nature shows us, between these texts and the History of humanity.

2. *The idea of living Nature.* The cosmos is not only a series of correspondences. Permeated with invisible but active forces, the whole of Nature, considered as a living organism, as a person, has a history, connected with that of the human being and of the divine world. To that are often added interpretations, heavy with implications, of the passage from Romans 7:19–22 according to which suffering Nature, subject to the exile and to vanity, also awaits its deliverance.

3. *The role of mediations and of the imagination.* These two notions are mutually complementary. Rituals, symbols charged with multiple meanings (mandala, Tarot cards, biblical verse, etc.), and intermediary spirits (hence, angels) appear as so many mediations. These have the capacity to provide passages between different levels of reality, when the “active” imagination (the “creative” or “magical” imagination—a specific, but generally dormant faculty of the human mind), exercised on these mediations, makes them a tool of knowledge (*gnosis*), indeed, of “magical action on the real.”

4. *The experience of transmutation.* This characteristic comes to complete the three preceding ones by conferring an “experiential” character on them. It is the transformation of oneself, which can be a “second birth”; and as a corollary that of a part of Nature (e.g., in a number of alchemical texts).

As far as the two so-called secondary characteristics are concerned, they are, on the one hand, a practice of *concordance*: It is a matter of positing *a priori* that common denominators can exist among several different traditions, indeed among all of them, and then of undertaking to compare them with a view to finding a higher truth that overhangs them. And it is, on the other hand, the emphasis put on the idea of *transmission*: Widespread in these esoteric currents especially

since the eighteenth century, it consists in insisting on the importance of “channels of transmission”; for example, “transmission” from master to disciple, from the initiator to the “initiable” (self-initiation is not possible). To be valuable or valid, this transmission is often considered necessarily to belong to an affiliation whose authenticity (“regularity”) is considered genuine. This aspect concerns the Western esoteric currents especially starting at the time when they began to give birth to initiatic societies (i.e., starting from the mid-eighteenth century).

This model amounted, in fact, to constructing the very object of a specialty for which no theoretical construct (at least, of an empirico-critical character) had yet been proposed. It often has been employed by other researchers, even though, like any working model, it has been the object of some criticism relative to some of its implications. As Wouter J. Hanegraaff, for example, has remarked, it would not sufficiently account for the importance of movements like the pietism of the seventeenth century, or for the process of secularization undergone by the esoteric currents of the nineteenth and the twentieth. Anyhow, it is an acknowledged fact that no construct should be considered as a “truth” by its proponent; actually, it is nothing but a provisional heuristic tool meant to revive fresh methodological thinking. To wit, a number of scholars have contributed, subsequently, to refine our working tool (*infra*, section V).

It seemed to us that the expression “form of thought” (however debatable the choice of this expression may be) could be applied to this modern Western esotericism thus defined. Perhaps it could be claimed—which is not our purpose—that it appears in other cultures or periods as well. Still it would be appropriate to confine ourselves to the empirical observation of the facts; that is, not to hypostatize this expression with a view to legitimating the idea according to which there would exist a sort of “universal esotericism.” Just as there is a form of thought of an esoteric type, so there exist forms of thought of a scientific, mystical, theological, and utopian type, for example (with the proviso that each of them be understood within its specific historical, cultural context, and not *sub specie aeternitatis*). The specificity of each consists of the simultaneous presence of a certain number of fundamental characteristics or components, a same component obviously being able to belong to several forms of thought. Each brings its own

approaches and procedures into play, its various manners of arranging its components, of connecting them. In doing so, it constitutes for itself a corpus of references, a culture.

Certain components can be common to several forms of thought; for example, both to “mysticism” and to “esotericism.” With the latter, the “scientific” maintains complex and ambiguous relationships of which certain Nature philosophies are the stake. It is especially interesting to observe the oppositions, the rejections; they not only are due to incompatible components between two forms of thought, but also can result from an epistemological break within one of them. Thus, before theology discarded (section II) its symbolic richness still present in the Middle Ages, for example in the School of Chartres, in that of Oxford, or in the case of a Saint Bonaventure (chapter 1, section II), it was still close to what we here call modern Western esotericism.

The first five of the six characteristics or components enumerated above are not, let it be noted, of a doctrinal order. They appear much rather as receptacles where various forms of the *imaginaire* can find a place. For example, in the matter of “correspondences” we are dealing as much with hierarchies of a Neoplatonic type (the above is placed hierarchically higher than the below) as with more “democratic” views (God is found as much in a seed as anywhere else; heliocentrism changes nothing essential, etc.); in the matter of “transmutation,” as much with that of Nature as with that of only humanity; in the matter of cosmogony, with schemes as much emanationist (God creates the universe by emanation of Himself) as creationist (the universe was created *ex nihilo*); in the matter of reincarnation, as much with a defense as with a rejection of this idea; in the matter of attitude to modernity, some easily integrate it, others reject all its values, and so forth. In fact, for most of the representatives of this form of thought, it is less a question of believing than of knowing (*gnosis*) and of “seeing” (by the exercise of active, creative imagination—third component). Thus, to approach the studied field as a series of receptacles for the *imaginaire* appears to us more in accordance with its very nature than to attempt to define it starting from what would be a matter of particular explicit beliefs, professions of faith, doctrines—an attempt that, according to us, could only lead to a dead end. This procedure has,

moreover, the advantage of favoring the methodological approaches of the pluri- and transdisciplinary type that permit situating our field within the context of the humanities in general and the history of religions in particular.

V. State of Research and Institutionalization

On this methodological plane, precisely, a number of “generalists” (section III), whose major contributions are quoted in the bibliography appended to this book, have greatly contributed to establish the specialty on solid bases. In the first place, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, as much by his major work, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1996), as by an impressive series of articles subsequently published, all of fundamental importance. He currently stands out as the main scholar among the “generalists” of our specialty—besides the fact that he has also authored various cogent studies on specific authors and currents. Comparable in his approach is Marco Pasi; his scholarly works have hitherto focused principally on the so-called “occultist” current, but he has completed them with very pertinent working models to treat notions such as “occultism” and “magic” in the context of modern Western esotericism (cf. especially his thesis, *La notion de magie dans le courant occultiste en Angleterre [1875–1947]*, 2004). Let us also cite Jean-Pierre Brach for his survey examinations of the historical characteristics proper to esoteric currents, as they manifest themselves in the European cultural arena from the end of the fifteenth century; Andreas Kilcher, who, in studying the various usages of the polysemous term “Kabbalah” in the modern West, has shed new light on the migrations and derivations of modern esoteric currents (*Die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala als ästhetisches Paradigma*, 1998); Olav Hammer, one of whose works has the title, evocative for our purpose: *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (2001). Noteworthy too is Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s excellent introduction to our field (*The Western Esoteric Traditions. A Historical Introduction*; 2008).

Still other “generalists” are situated within this body of theoretical thoughts that all rest on a solid work of texts. Among them

are Arthur Versluis, by his articles published in his review *Esoterica* and by a number of his works; and Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, who attempts, in particular, to elucidate conceptually and historically the nature of the relationships between esotericism and Christianity. The recent works of Kocku von Stuckrad, notably his book *Was ist Esoterik?* (2005), introduce a model of orientation that is just as “historian,” rather different nevertheless from the preceding ones; its application can, in our view, appear problematic as to the specificity of our field—but it is no less stimulating.

This list of “generalists” concerned with methodology is not exhaustive, but rather suggests that the specialty, understood as much *lato sensu* as *stricto sensu* (twenty centuries, or only five), could already have been a subject of academic institutionalization. The process began in 1964. We owe to the Religious Sciences section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Paris, Sorbonne) the merit of having, that year, been the first university institution to create within itself a position entitled *Directeur d'Études* [Professor] (that of François Secret) of the History of Christian Esotericism. The name changed in 1979 (with Antoine Faivre) to the History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe (when Jean-Pierre Brach took over, in 2002, the term *mystical* was deleted from that chair title). At the University of Amsterdam, a Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (actually, for the History of Western Esotericism as we understand it here) was created in 1999. It has a specific chair (held by Wouter J. Hanegraaff), flanked by two Assistant Professorships [Br: Senior lecturers], a secretary and two PhD lecturers; it thus offers its students a complete academic trajectory. At the University of Lampeter (United Kingdom), a Centre for Western Esotericism saw the light of day in 2002; and in 2006, at that of Exeter (United Kingdom), a chair entitled Western Esotericism, occupied by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, forms the basis of the “Exeter Center for the Study of Esotericism” (EXECESO). It too, like the Center in Amsterdam, offers its students a complete academic trajectory. The close collaboration established between Exeter, Amsterdam, and Paris, and of these three with other institutions, is part of a development with considerable impact on scholarship internationally.

Besides these creations properly speaking, several initiatives were taken. For example, at the University of Lausanne (Département inter-facultaire d'Histoire et Sciences des Religions), a biannual program was established in 2003 (by Silvia Mancini), dedicated to an introduction to the field of this specialty. In Germany, at the University Martin Luther of Halle-Wittenberg, research programs were created (notably by Monika Neugebauer-Wölk), dedicated to the esoteric currents of the period of the Enlightenment as well as to the “hermetico-esoteric movements” of the beginning of Modern Times. At Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich, Hereward Tilton led from 2004 to 2006 a seminar called “Introduction to the History of Western Esotericism.” We could give many more examples.

To these initiatives, we may add various symposia, colloquia, and associations.

In the United States, the American Academy of Religion—the largest association of religious sciences in the world—a program unit “Modern Western Esotericism” was instituted for the annual congress of 1980. Several others followed it, among which was “Esotericism” in 1986. It ceased to function in 1993 because of the perennialist orientation of its organizers, strongly criticized by several of the participants. It then made way, starting in 1994, for programs of a historico-critical type directed by James Santucci; first, under the title “Theosophy and Theosophic Thought,” then in 1999 under that of “Western Esotericism since the Early Modern Period.” Since 2004 this program unit has become “Western Esotericism”; under the direction of Allison Coudert, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, and Cathy Gutierrez. It also follows a strictly historian orientation. Let us note that these last reformulations (from 1994 to 2004) coincided with the revival of the process of institutionalization and professionalization in several countries (cf. *supra*), begun in the wake of the creation of the Parisian chair in 1964. Still in the United States, new associations of an international character saw the light of day, which work in this same spirit. Thus, the Association for the Study of Esotericism created in 2002, directed by Arthur Versluis and Allison Coudert; among the conferences that it has organized appears notably *Esotericism, Art and Imagination* (University of Davis, California, 2006).

Besides these properly American initiatives, in the context of the International Association for the History of Religion (which holds its congress every five years), a workshop Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion (Proceedings published, cf. bibliography) was created in 1995 in Mexico City. Two other workshops followed it: Western Esotericism and Jewish Mysticism (Durban, 2000) and Western Esotericism and Polemics (Tokyo, 2005). The Association for International Research on Esotericism and of the Religious Sciences section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* held the conference *Autour de l'oeuvre de Frances A. Yates (1899–1981): Du réveil de la tradition hermétique à la naissance de la science moderne* (Paris, 2001). At Esalen (California), a program of four symposia was established: *The Varieties of Esoteric Experience* (2004), *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in Western Esotericism* (Proceedings published in 2008), *Hidden Truths, Novel Truths* (2006), *Western Esotericism and Altered States of Consciousness* (2007). In such a context are situated one of the nine sessions of the international conference *Religious History of Europe and Asia of September 2006* at Bucharest, whose theme was “Hermetic and Esoteric Currents,” and the international conference *Forms and Currents of Western Esotericism of October 2007* at Venice (Proceedings published in 2008).

Let us mention finally the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (<http://www.esswe.org/>), created in 2002. This place of exchange and information brings together many researchers from the whole world and has already organized two international conferences: *Constructing Tradition, Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (University of Tübingen, 2007, Proceedings forthcoming), and *Capitals of European Esotericism and Transcultural Dialogue* (University of Strasbourg, 2009, Proceedings forthcoming).

The list would be long of all the collective works, articles of a methodological and philological nature, and so on, which are of interest to the generalist and which have seen the light of day in various countries for about fifteen years. To some of the publications already mentioned, it is appropriate especially to mention the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, published in 2005. Its two volumes comprise some four hundred articles written by about one hundred and eighty collaborators and cover the field of Western esotericism

from Late Antiquity until today; cf. *in cauda* the bibliography, which also includes a list of specialized libraries and journals (not least the biannual *Aries. Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, published since 2002). And because the bibliography does not include the titles of articles but only of books, it seems appropriate to mention here the copious annual rubric entitled “Bulletin d’histoire des ésotérismes,” held by the “generalist” Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire since 1996 in the *Revue des Sciences philologiques et théologiques* (his book reviews gathered in this “Bulletin” already constitute a wealth of information).

VI. Past and Present Obstacles to the Recognition of This Specific Field

Hence, after a long period of marginalization, this specific field is increasingly the subject of official recognition. However, four obstacles have delayed this recognition, more or less continuing to slow its development.

The first obstacle is the existence of approaches of a religionist/universalist character. This has been sufficiently discussed in section III for it to be superfluous to insist on the necessity, for historians, to distinguish themselves clearly from such approaches—which, obviously, does not imply for as much that they should refrain from making a statement about their philosophical pertinence.

The second obstacle is the “confusionism” favored by the first of the meanings discussed in section I. We often see even serious people, specialists of particular disciplines, employ “esotericism” as a portmanteau (or “blanket”) word for lack of anything better, with the complicity of their readers and publishers, to refer to some of the areas they treat (such as *imaginaire*, initiatic or fantasy literature, religious symbolism, artistic works associated with some aura of mystery, etc.) This tendency is due to the more or less implicit adoption of a “received idea” that spread little by little in the West, especially since the nineteenth century. It consists in positing the existence of a sort of counter-culture, vaguely understood as the whole of what is covered by the first of the six meanings of “esotericism.” And by the effect of a curious reversal, it happens that this word no longer refers

to that whole, but is found summoned to refer strangely to a single aspect of “magic” and/or “occult sciences.” For example, in the *Dictionnaire historique de la magie et des sciences occultes* (2006), directed by Jean-Michel Sallmann, appears the entry “Western esotericism.” Thus, for Sallmann, “Western esotericism” is one of the aspects of what he understands by “magic” and “occult sciences,” on the same level as “Miracles,” “Cult of saints,” “Unicorn,” “Fairies,” and so on—entries, among so many others of the same type, presented in this dictionary. In addition, just as we fail to understand why an image, a theme or a motif would be “esoteric” (cf. *supra*, section I, the remarks concerning the first meaning), so it appears to us at least strange to posit that miracles, the cult of saints, the unicorn, fairies (so many images, themes or motifs) come under “magic” and “occult knowledge.”

The third obstacle is due to the residual influence of theological models or presuppositions in the study of religions in general and that of Christianity in particular. Even though the History of Religions had begun, since the nineteenth century, to emancipate itself from Christian theology, people had nonetheless long continued to adopt insufficiently critical (mainly crypto-Catholic) views. They saw the esoteric currents as no more than marginal heresies or more or less “condemnable” superstitions—although in fact they generally appear to be much less “marginal” than “transversal.” To start from doctrinal elements only perpetuates misunderstandings; with the aid of bits and pieces of theology or metaphysics taken here and there, one can construct a heresy that does not exist and then have a good time criticizing it. Now, even granted that the discourses we here qualify as esoteric sometimes contain heretical propositions with regard to religious institutions, this is in no way what defines these discourses as “esoteric.” Indeed, a heresy, in order to be considered as such, must be formulated in terms of concepts incompatible with other concepts that constitute a dogma. Now, esoteric discourses are generally much less of the order of the concept than of the image, and more generally of mythical thought.

Moreover, this form of thought—as springs out from the following chapters—frequently penetrates most of the established religions. Catholicism obviously does not escape it. Contrary to what many