

Magic and Mysticism

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An Introduction to Western Esotericism

Arthur Versluis

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To those who were there at the very beginning, Antoine Faivre, Jean-Pierre Brach, H. T. Hakl, Wouter Hanegraaff, Claire Fanger, Joscelyn Godwin, Nicholas and Clare Goodrick-Clarke, Christopher McIntosh, Marco Pasi, Kocku von Stuckrad, and Karen-Claire Voss to the founding members of the Association for the Study of Esotericism, true colleagues every one, and to all who share the spirit of exploration.

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Chapter One

Introduction

WHAT IS ESOTERICISM?

Strictly speaking, the term *esoteric* refers to knowledge reserved for a small group; it derives from the Greek word *esotero*, meaning “within,” or “inner.” In our context, the word *esoteric* implies inner or spiritual knowledge held by a limited circle, as opposed to *exoteric*, publicly known or “outer” knowledge. The term *Western esotericism*, then, refers to inner or hidden spiritual knowledge transmitted through Western European historical currents that in turn feed into North American and other non-European settings. Defined in this simple way, esoteric knowledge can be traced throughout Western history from antiquity to the present, even if it is richly varied in kind, ranging from the Mysteries of ancient Greece and Rome to Gnostic groups to Hermetic and alchemical practitioners, all the way to contemporary esoteric groups or new religious movements.

Characteristic of esotericism is a claim to gnosis, or direct spiritual insight into cosmology or metaphysics.¹ This characteristic has the advantage of being broad enough to include the full range of esoteric traditions, but narrow enough to exclude exoteric figures or movements. Furthermore, such a traditional term preserves the distinction between conventional or mostly rationally obtained knowledge on the one hand, and gnosis on the other. Alchemists search for direct spiritual insight into nature and seek to transmute certain substances thereby; astrologers seek direct spiritual insight into the cosmos and use it to analyze events; magicians seek direct spiritual insight and use it to affect the course of events; theosophers seek direct spiritual insight in order to realize their own “angelical nature.” But in all cases, aspirants seek direct spiritual insight into the hidden nature of the cosmos and of themselves—they seek gnosis.

Esotericism refers, then, to the various traditions that emerge around these various approaches to gnosis, and one could as accurately refer to “Western gnostic” as “Western esoteric” traditions. Western esoteric traditions broadly speaking are, of course, widely varied in form and nature, but as we see below, they all have in common:

1. gnosis or gnostic insight, i.e., knowledge of hidden or invisible realms or aspects of existence (including both cosmological and metaphysical gnosis) and
2. esotericism, meaning that this hidden knowledge is either explicitly restricted to a relatively small group of people, or implicitly self-restricted by virtue of its complexity or subtlety.

In other words, Western esoteric traditions, generally speaking, entail secret or semisecret knowledge about humanity, the cosmos, and the divine.

MAGIC AND MYSTICISM

Both the words *magic* and *mysticism* remain somewhat nebulous. Scholars continue to disagree about what magic is, and for that matter, about what mysticism is. Commonly, of course, magic is held to do with achieving worldly aims through supernatural means; and mysticism is seen as a term describing those who seek and who claim to realize union with the divine. Yet these are problematic distinctions—many magicians seem rather mystical in inclination; and conversely, some mystics seem rather close to magic in what they espouse or claim. To give two examples: the well-known *Book of Abramelin the Mage* edited by S. L. MacGregor Mathers includes a ritual of seclusion and of a kind of mysticism (seeking union with one’s guardian angel) that on the face of it does not seem to belong to “magic” so much as to mysticism. And one might also note the assertion of John Pordage (1608–1681) at the end of his *Letter on the Philosophic Stone* that one who followed his path of spiritual alchemy will become a magus. This is the expected achievement of one who follows the counsel of Pordage, arguably the greatest mystic of the theosophic tradition after Jacob Böhme!² Clearly it is not as easy as it might seem to divide mysticism and magic into two discrete categories.

Still, we may broadly say that esoteric traditions tend to belong to one of two general currents: outward, toward cosmological mysteries, or inward, toward spiritual knowledge or knowledge of the divine. Of course, these two tendencies should not be too strictly interpreted, since they often overlap or merge. But one can distinguish roughly between magical traditions whose

primary aims are essentially cosmological in nature—that is, more or less “worldly” in the sense of garnering wealth or power—and mystical traditions that explicitly reject worldly aims in favor of inner or spiritual illumination. This distinction is a fundamental one in the West, and we can see it recurring again and again. A mystic like Eckhart and a medieval magus or necromancer do belong to different currents, not least because whereas Eckhart seeks divine wisdom, the magus seeks cosmological knowledge or power. Magic has to do with power over others or over nature; often, the magician seeks to command. Mysticism, on the other hand, has to do with the surrender and transcendence of self and of power; the mystic’s primary interest is not in worldly command but in realization of the divine.

Both magic and mysticism belong under the broad rubric of “esotericism” because both magicians and mystics pursue or claim esoteric knowledge that belongs only to them or to their tradition. They themselves exclude the *hoi polloi* and lay claim to inner or secret knowledge. Indeed, we can go further than that: for we may also say that magic and mysticism form the twin currents that, like the intertwined serpents of Hermes’s caduceus, together make up much of the stream of Western esotericism. On the one hand, we have the current of cosmological gnosis to which belongs not only magic, but also alchemy, astrology, the various “mancies” like geomancy or chiromancy, and all those other forms of secret or semisecret knowledge of the cosmos. And on the other hand we have the current of metaphysical gnosis, the most lucid form of which is the negative mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite or Meister Eckhart. Together, these two currents, which intertwine and separate, form the larger field of Western esotericism.

Put another way, magic and mysticism represent the ends of a spectrum that we may term Western esotericism, and most esoteric figures and groups are to be found in the middle, that is, incorporating aspects of both (see figure 1.1). Thus we may refer to “mystico-magical” or “magico-mystical” currents, along the lines of recent scholarship in Jewish esotericism. Moshe Idel refers to a “theosophical-theurgical” model—dealing with “the map of the divine realm (theosophy) and the way in which human deeds affect it (theurgy)”—as the most common in kabbalistic tradition.³ But he also refers to a “mystico-magical model” that represents not the “escape of the soul from this world into the spiritual universe” so much as “the induction” or “even the compulsion of the divine powers within the material world.” Thus divine annihilation may be a means of reaching “magical, energetic attainments.”⁴ While we can find examples of a “theosophical-theurgical” model in Western esotericism, especially in the lineage of Jacob Böhme, examples of “mystico-magical” or “magico-mystical” models are much more widespread. Understood in this way, alchemical writings, for instance, may be neither a mystical code nor a magical protochemistry, but partake of both currents at once.

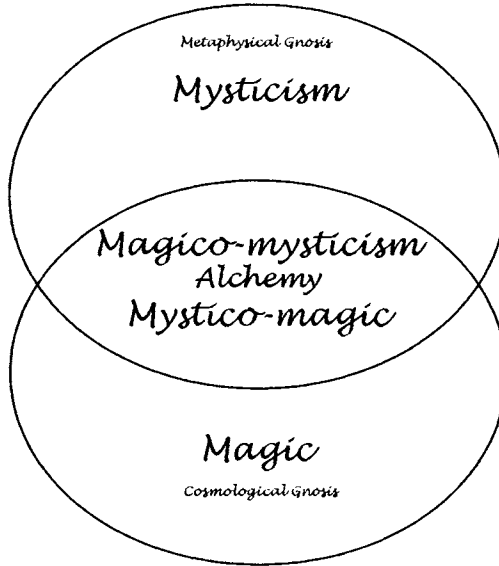


Figure 1.1.

Whether under the rubrics of magic or mysticism, *gnosis* refers to direct insight into what is largely hidden from rationalistic modes of knowledge. A primary difference is in intention: the mystic seeks direct insight for its own sake, whereas the magus seeks to have effects in the world. But as the scholar of Jewish esotericism Elliot Wolfson reminds us, “ecstasy and theurgy can be seen as two manifestations of the same phenomenon.” Driven by “extraneous taxonomic concerns,” he continues, contemporary scholars indeed may “artificially separate” what in fact are “concurrent” or closely related processes.⁵ Just so. I am not suggesting that magic and mysticism are the same thing, but rather that they both, as cosmological and metaphysical forms of gnosis, belong to and indeed help to define the larger spectrum of the esoteric.

DYNAMIC MODES OF THE ESOTERIC

Of course, the Christian West has a long history of heretic hunting that goes back to the foundational period of late antiquity, and that later was institutionalized in the Inquisitions during the medieval period. As I show in *The New Inquisitions*, we still are influenced by the legacy of heretic hunting, which continues to inform religion, politics, and even scholarship right up to

the present.⁶ What Wouter Hanegraaff calls the “grand polemical narrative” of antioccultism and heresiophobia remains a shaping force in scholarship, even in scholarship on esoteric religious traditions.⁷ As a result, there are almost uncharted areas of Western religious and cultural history, mainly because these areas were often dismissed with terms like *heresy*, or *occultism*, or *superstition*. The history of esotericism has to be seen in light of this anti-esoteric dynamic, which continues to manifest itself .

An implicit antiesotericism sometimes appears in a rigorously externalist approach that by its very nature remains outside and even hostile to the esotericism that it apparently studies. In the sphere of the esoteric, this is potentially far more disastrous than a “religionist” approach that at least seeks to understand an esoteric tradition, figure, or group on its own terms. Externalism is visible in a variety of reductionisms, including deconstructionism. As Moshe Idel puts it, whereas “traditional radicalism in Kabbalah was ready to deconstruct the text in order to find God by a more direct experience,” “modern deconstruction had first to kill God or transcendental meaning in order to divinize the text.”⁸ Magic and mysticism as subjects of academic study are still marginalized, in part because of the long-standing antiesoteric bias in the West, and by the related desire to turn both subjects into objects of rationalist discourse and manipulation.

What I am suggesting, in other words, is that in magic and mysticism we see areas of study that by their very nature are not entirely reducible to objects of rationalist discourse and manipulation, but instead border on and open into dimensions of life that remain partially veiled to us unless we enter into them for ourselves. Better than alternative terms, the word *gnosis* helps convey some sense of these other dimensions of consciousness. Esotericism, in other words, borders on consciousness studies, and its experiential center also results in its inherent and definitive syncretism (mingling disparate religious beliefs) or syncrasis (mingling practices). From antiquity to the present, esoteric practitioners have consistently mingled together disparate beliefs, traditions, and practices in order to create new esoteric syntheses. As the study of esotericism continues, it will have to develop more sophisticated phenomenological ways of approaching and understanding what is esoteric.

Such approaches may be in terms of dynamic social relationships. These relationships can be characterized in terms of polarities, for instance, (1) insider/outsider, or esoteric/exoteric, closely related to a heretic/orthodox dynamic—a recurrent refrain throughout the history of Western esotericism; (2) experiential gnostic/rationalist. Esoteric currents like alchemy, magic, or mysticism inherently include experiential dimensions that can be described as gnostic, that is, direct experiential knowledge of invisible or transcendent realms; and (3) synthetic flexibility/rigid doctrinalism or heretic/orthodox.

Esotericism tends toward fluid joining of disparate religious traditions or practices but is often defined from the outside by heresiophobic rhetoric. All of these represent social vectors that help shape esotericism as a dynamic phenomenon. Although this book is an introduction to the twin esoteric themes of magic and mysticism, it is also informed by awareness of how esotericism is shaped by social dynamics, and of the potential benefits of remaining open rather than closed or self-consciously external, let alone hostile to one's subjects.

ESOTERICISM AS A FIELD FOR ACADEMIC INQUIRY

Until relatively recently, the field of “esotericism” or “esoteric studies” remained more or less ignored in academia. There were, of course, major individual works devoted to the field in the mid- to late twentieth century—one thinks, for instance, of the books of historian Frances Yates, and of course of the many books and articles by Antoine Faivre, on his own a major force in the development of Western esotericism as a domain of inquiry. But throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there had remained almost no acknowledgment in academia that “esotericism” or “Western esoteric traditions” could be seen as constituting a whole area of study, that such diverse traditions or movements as alchemy, astrology, magic, Rosicrucianism, and theosophy all bear certain defining elements in common and should be considered in the larger historical context of Western esoteric traditions from antiquity onward. This situation, however, most emphatically has begun to change.

There are a number of reasons for the new scholarly interest in Western esotericism. From the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, academic institutions and scholars tended to more or less assiduously ignore those fields or topics that might be seen as calling into question the premises of scientific materialism, or that had historically been censured by the Christian church. Additionally, a field like Western esotericism cuts across numerous academic disciplinary boundaries and cannot easily be pigeonholed, especially since study of such traditions entails work in disciplines ranging from history and religious studies to literature and art history, to name only a few. In many respects, Western esoteric traditions have remained closed areas of scholarly inquiry, shut off by a variety of artificial barriers.

But by the late twentieth century, many scholars had recognized the concept of “transdisciplinarity,” meaning the possibility of scholarly exploration beyond or in the interstices between particular disciplinary limitations. A major figure in this movement is the French physicist Basarab Nicolescu, who

founded an international association devoted to transdisciplinarity, and who himself published a book on the potential relationships between the Christian theosophy of Jacob Böhme and the contemporary sciences, in particular physics. This new openness to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary scholarly research reflects what may be a fundamental shift in modern academia away from strict disciplinary boundaries and into new fields of research.

It seems no coincidence that at precisely the same time that transdisciplinarity emerged in academia, so too the investigation of Western esoteric traditions began to flourish. Antoine Faivre held the first academic chair, in the Sorbonne, devoted specifically to this field (a position now occupied by Jean-Pierre Brach); and Wouter Hanegraaff holds a specially endowed chair, at the University of Amsterdam. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke is professor of Western Esotericism and director of the Exeter Center for the Study of Esotericism at the University of Exeter in England. In addition, the number of scholarly publications devoted to this field began to multiply; the State University of New York Press and Peeters Publishing both developed publications series in the field, and a number of international journals emerged, including *ARIES* and *Esoterica* (www.esoteric.msu.edu). What is more, the International Association for the History of Religion (IAHR) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) have begun to include whole sections devoted to Western esotericism. In North America, the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) was founded in 2001 and held its first international conference (see www.aseweb.org) in 2004; shortly thereafter, the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) was founded.

The contemporary academic study of esotericism began with Antoine Faivre, author of *Access to Western Esotericism*, who works historically and typologically. He defines six basic characteristics of modern Western esoteric thought (i.e., from the seventeenth century to the present), these being:

1. *Correspondences*. As the Hermetic dictum has it, “as above, so below,” meaning that there are precise correspondences between all aspects of the universe, including between the human microcosm and the macrocosm.
2. *Living Nature*. Nature is not a collection of objects to be manipulated, but alive and connected via hidden, subtle forces that can be awakened and drawn upon through *magia naturalis*, natural magic.
3. *Imagination and Mediations*. Here imagination refers not to wild fantasy, but to a means of spiritual perception, insight into the *mundus imaginalis* or spiritual realm(s) that can be seen only by those with purified vision.
4. *Experience of Transmutation*. Transmutation here refers to metamorphosis, sometimes of natural substances (as of lead into gold via alchemical work) and sometimes of the individual (from ignorance to illumination).

5. *Praxis of the Concordance.* Essentially, Faivre refers here to the tendency of esotericists to see the parallels between various traditions, as when in antiquity one finds Hermetists who are also Gnostic Christians. It is very close to syncretism or syncretism—the joining of various traditions in practice.
6. *Transmission.* An emphasis on the importance of the initiatic chain—the transmission of secret knowledge from master to disciple—a tendency found in traditions as disparate as alchemy and magic.⁹

Faivre's typology emphasizes the cosmological dimensions of esotericism and focuses on the early modern and modern periods, whereas other scholars have sought to widen the scope of the field. Dutch scholar Wouter Hanegraaff argues, in a whole series of articles, for an empiricohistorical approach to a field that de facto ranges from antiquity to the New Age.¹⁰ A German scholar, Kocku von Stuckrad, argues even more broadly from a perspective of discourse analysis that Western esotericism has two primary characteristics: claims to higher knowledge, and means of access to that higher knowledge. "Higher knowledge" is "a vision of truth as a master key for answering all questions of humankind," and the means to higher knowledge include primarily the mediation of revelatory beings like Hermes, and direct individual experience.¹¹ My own approach here is a new, inclusive one that incorporates many aspects of these other perspectives and draws from a range of disciplines while remaining historically grounded.

One of the most striking future areas for investigation lies in comparative religious studies. Many Western esoteric traditions parallel Asian religious traditions in various ways—there are, for instance, Asian alchemical traditions that correspond strikingly to some forms of European alchemy; just as there are some interesting parallels between Vajrayana Buddhism and Christian theosophy, or between Asian and European astrological or magical traditions. These are all comparative fields that remain largely unexamined and that could shed much light on the traditions concerned. But investigations of this nature require great sophistication of knowledge in a range of fields and languages, as well as extensive general knowledge of various eras. In many respects, only now are such comparisons even possible.

In short, it appears we stand on the brink of a new era for scholarship in esotericism. The aim of this book is to orient readers and potential scholars to this particular field and to its possibilities, but also to provide a new, more integrative approach. Some authors have warned against bringing esotericism into the academy, and there are indeed dangers in doing so.¹² However, by approaching these esoteric figures and traditions historically and empirically, working integratively rather than by approaching them with any particular

ideological axe to grind, we may well discover much of value that had too hastily been jettisoned or ignored in the past several centuries. What follows is a new, historically grounded approach to esotericism that focuses on the twin themes of magic and mysticism, of cosmological and metaphysical gnosis. One enters into the field with a sense of adventure, and I hope that this sense of adventure both pervades this work and will continue in the future, for that above all is the sign under which investigation in this field necessarily proceeds.¹³

NOTES

1. Some might object to the term *cosmological gnosis* to describe, say, a magical ritual, but if we consider that the practice of magic, including erotic or other kinds of mundane magic, entails an effort at union with or effects upon others or on the cosmos through union with (or partial union through control of) unseen forces or principles, then the word *gnosis* modified in this way becomes appropriate. The kind of knowing implied in magical or mystical gnoses is not identical with rationally obtained knowledge, and hence another term than *knowledge* is preferable.

2. See, for example, *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*, ed. S. L. Macgregor Mathers (London: Watkins, 1900), which includes a ritual of seclusion and of a kind of mysticism (seeking union with one's guardian angel) that on the face of it does not seem to belong to "magic." See also William Bloom, *The Sacred Magician: A Ceremonial Diary* (Glastonbury, UK: Gothic Image, 1992). Bloom sought to pursue the ritual magical tradition that is said to lead to union with one's guardian angel. For Pordage's assertion, see Arthur Versluis, ed., *Wisdom's Book: The Sophia Anthology* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2000), 76. The specific sociological and anthropological controversies over *magic* and *mysticism* are simply too extensive to delve into here. Various books that address these controversies include Bruce Kapferer, *Beyond Rationalism: Rethinking Magic, Witchcraft, and Sorcery* (New York: Berghahn, 2003); Owen Davies, *Cunning-folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London: Hambledon, 2003); and Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer, *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), to cite only a handful of the most recent. Likewise, one could cite the various books and articles belonging to the controversies over mysticism, especially the works of, on the one side, Stephen Katz, and on the other, Robert K. C. Forman.

3. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 214.

4. Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 86–87.

5. See Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 209–10.

6. See Arthur Versluis, *The New Inquisitions: Heretic-hunting and the Origins of Modern Totalitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

7. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research," *Aries* 5 (2005) 2: 225–54.

8. See Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 419.

9. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 10–15.

10. See Wouter Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism," in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7 (1995) 2: 99–129; Hanegraaff, "On the Construction of 'Esoteric Traditions,'" in A. Faivre and W. Hanegraaff, eds., *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 11–61; Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counter-culture and New Complexity," *Aries* 1 (2001) 1: 5–37; and Hanegraaff, "The Study of Western Esotericism: New Approaches to Christian and Secular Culture," in Peter Antes, Armin Geertz, and Randi Warne, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2004).

11. See Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," in *Religion* 35 (2005) 78–97, in particular, 88–89, 92–93. To these two, he adds a third, which is "ontological monism," that is, "their cosmology derives from world views that constitute a unity of material and non-material realms of reality." And he concludes by noting that just as it is not necessary to define "religion" too specifically in order to conduct research in religious studies—there is a generally agreed-upon area of research—so too there is a rough agreement on the domain of esotericism. This is, in general, true. See also Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox, 2005).

12. See Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney, *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 2006), xi.

13. A note regarding documentation: when possible, I cite from section and chapter or other general headings in primary sources so that they can be referenced easily in different editions. My guiding principle is to rely on primary works when possible, and to suggest some secondary works that may be useful if readers wish to pursue a given topic further.

Chapter Two

Antiquity

The roots of Western esoteric traditions are manifold, but there are a number of specific sources that we consider here. Among these are (1) ancient mystery traditions, (2) ancient Greek and Roman magical traditions, (3) Plato and Platonism, followed by (4) Hermetism, (5) Gnosticism, (6) Jewish mysticism, and (7) Christian gnosis, exemplified by such figures as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Dionysius the Areopagite. To these, we could also add more extraneous currents like Manichaeism, although the precise influences of the religion of light, for example, are not quite so clear or enduring as these others. We discuss each of these sources in turn, but begin where the word *esoteric* itself derives from—with the Mystery traditions of antiquity.

However, for thematic reasons, I would like to begin with a fundamental distinction proposed by Christian gnostic Dionysius the Areopagite between what he termed the *via positiva*, or the path of symbols, and the *via negativa*, or the path of negation or absolute transcendence. We discuss Dionysius's work in detail in the next section, but here I would like to remark on the apparent predominance, in the ancient Egyptian tradition, of hieroglyphic symbolism. As we look at what remains to us of antiquity, the various steles and wall carvings, we certainly could conclude that both in the Egyptian tradition and in the subsequent Greco-Roman Mystery traditions, the *via positiva* or path of symbols predominates. In antiquity, initiatory truths were conveyed primarily through myths and symbols and affiliated rites, and not so much through the kinds of sheer negation that one finds in what Dionysius calls the *via negativa*. This is an important general remark to make because so much of the subsequent Western esoteric traditions also were to correspond to the *via positiva* rather than to the *via negativa*. One might attribute this tendency toward the symbolic in part to the Egyptian origins of Greco-Roman Mystery and Hermetic traditions.