

Introduction Series to Western Esotericism

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*The Academic Study
of
Western Esotericism:*

Early Developments and Related Fields

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H.E.R.M.E.S. ACADEMIC PRESS
Copenhagen, 2013

PREFACE

The conception of this book series began with a series of lectures on the academic study of Western esotericism held as an MA student, in the History of Religion, at the University of Copenhagen in the fall of 2006. It seemed to me then—as it still does now—that there is a growing worldwide interest in the nature of Western esotericism and in the continued growth of its study as an academic discipline across the academic landscape.

Several significant institutional steps have already been taken. In 1964 the first chair, for what was then entitled ‘History of Christian Esotericism’ (*Histoire de l'ésotérisme chrétien*), on the suggestion of Henry Corbin (1903-1978), was established at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, (Religious Studies Section), Sorbonne (Paris). François Secret (1911-2003), an expert on Christian cabala,¹ was the first to hold this chair until his retirement in 1979 when it was renamed ‘History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe’ (*Histoire des courants ésotériques et mystiques dans l'Europe*

¹ The Hebrew word קַבָּלָה (to receive) is commonly transliterated into English as ‘Kabbalah’. The Christian interpretation of the ‘Jewish Kabbalah’ is, however, often designated the ‘Christian cabala’. To distinguish the ‘Jewish Kabbalah’ from the Christian Kabbalah the designation ‘Christian cabala’ will be used in this book.

moderne et contemporaine).² From then on Antoine Faivre (1934-), who has been instrumental in defining this academic field, held the chair until his retirement in 2002 when Jean-Pierre Brach (1956-) took his place and continues the work on esotericism to this day.

In 1999 at the University of Amsterdam, a sub-department for the 'History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents' was established as a chair-group in the 'Department of Theology and Religious Studies of the Faculty of Humanities' (later merged into the new department of 'Art, Religion and Cultural Sciences'). The permanent core of this department constitutes a full professorship, two assistant professors as well as a continued program of two PhD students. Its primary tasks are teaching and research in the domain of the history of hermetic philosophy and related currents (Western esotericism). The department has been very productive and offers BA and MA course programs on the history of esotericism as part of its religious studies program.

In late 2005 in Great Britain, a third chair and a center for the academic study of esotericism (EXESES0) was established, at the University of Exeter, coinciding with the formation of the new 'School of Humanities and Social Sciences' (combining the departments of History, Sociology,

² Later the term 'mystical' or 'mystiques' was omitted from the title, 'Histoire des courants ésotériques dans l'Europe moderne et contemporaine'.

Philosophy, Theology, Classics and Ancient History, and the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies). Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (1953-2012) was its first professor and director until his untimely death in 2012. The center (EXESES0) has continued in his spirit and has offered a complete MA program in esotericism as well as PhD supervision in this field of expertise.

Among the better-known learned societies for the study of esotericism are ASE (Association for the Study of Esotericism, est. 2002) based in the USA and ESSWE (European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, est. 2005) based in Europe. Important scholarly journals dedicated to esotericism (and related currents) also exist, such as *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* and *Esoterica: the journal of esoteric studies*, among others. Finally, the academic study has developed and continues to do so through the many significant articles and books published by pioneer scholars in the field, such as Antoine Faivre, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Arthur Versluis, Kocku von Stuckrad, and many others.

The overall purpose of this Introduction Series to Western Esotericism is both to contribute to these developments by providing interested readers and scholars alike with a comprehensive, yet concise, overview of Western esotericism from an academic perspective—including an overview of related topics, such as the occult, traditionalism, magic, Hermeticism, mysticism, Kabbalah, and

Gnosticism—as well as presenting and discussing the main theories on esotericism—such as those formulated by Antoine Faivre, Pierre A. Riffard, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Arthur Versluis and Kocku von Stuckrad—and the history of the main ideas and currents related to Western esotericism from antiquity to modern times. These volumes are therefore designed to be straightforward and educational. Focus will be placed on generality and overview rather than specific expert details. References will be kept at an academic minimum and the information will be presented in a manner that allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions, while still providing some critical discussions and categorizations.

The projected volumes in the series are as follows:

Volume 1: *The Academic Study of Western Esotericism: Early Developments and Related Fields*

Volume 2: *The Academic Study of Western Esotericism: Main Theories and Methods*

Volume 3: *The Academic Study of Western Esotericism: New Perspectives*

Volume 4: *The History of Western Esotericism during Antiquity (600 BCE - 525 CE)*

Volume 5: *The History of Western Esotericism during the Middle Ages (525-1300)*

Volume 6: *The History of Western Esotericism during the Renaissance (1300-1650)*

Volume 7: *The History of Western Esotericism in the*

Modern World (1650-1950)

The first three volumes will outline and discuss important topics related to Western esotericism, such as Gnosticism, Kabbalah, mysticism, Hermeticism, etc., and the main theories of Western esotericism as well as pose new perspectives. The next four volumes will offer a presentation and discussion of the history of Western esotericism from antiquity to modern times. It is hoped that these small volumes, encompassing both the theoretical and historical side of this new academic field, will thus aid in making the field itself more comprehensible to all interested in the subject and serve as useful handbooks for students and scholars working in the field.

Since the academic study of Western esotericism is as recent as it is, it has been found most fruitful to keep the discussion of both the range of theories and the history of Western esotericism as wide and open as possible in order to avoid unduly limiting the scope of the field itself. In relation to this, one caveat must be noted at this juncture. Although these volumes are limited to the West as expressed in the designation, *Western esotericism*, undeniable historical links between the West, the Middle East and far East exist which will be demonstrated and discussed throughout this book series along with various views already existing in the scholarly community. Indeed whether the designation 'Western' should

or will be considered valid in the future will be discussed throughout this series.

The reader will also become aware of the interdisciplinary or even trans-disciplinary nature of Western esotericism, as it is intertwined with many aspects of the history of science, religion, philosophy and art. So, even though Western esotericism is generally placed under history or more specifically under the history of religions, it is in fact contextually very difficult to separate it, not only from the history of religion, but equally from the history of science, philosophy and art.

What Western esotericism should embody, as a scholarly category, has not yet been settled – nor whether it might be more correct to speak of Western esotericisms in plural. Certain unique qualities, however – construed and still discussed in the scholarly community as central to Western esotericism – make it possible to speak of Western esotericism as something distinct from the conventional typologies of religion, science, philosophy and art. The simplest designation for Western esotericism is, that it is a *form of knowledge* based on direct insight (gnosis) rather than reason (as in philosophy), the senses (as in natural science) or faith/revelation (as in religion). Western esotericism no doubt covers much more than this, as will become evident throughout the volumes in this series, but as a preliminary definition, it will serve the function of introduction and provide the reader with an initial understanding.

Uncovering this important aspect of Western culture, touching upon what hitherto—and often times confusingly so—has been termed the occult, the hermetic tradition, mysticism and magic, will not only enlighten our understanding of largely overlooked aspects of Western culture, but change how we view Western culture, including the history of religion, science, philosophy and art. This exciting revisionary work has already begun and the present book series aspires to contribute to its advancement and further development and thereby help secure the academic study of Western esotericism as a field in its own right and perhaps inspire others toward the same endeavour.

Tim Rudbøg, Copenhagen, September 2012