



Review of the anthology
Egil Asprem / Julian Strube, eds. 2021.
New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism

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In recent years, the study of esotericism has seen sharp, sometimes polemical debates. The 13 articles of the volume at hand avoid polemics and offer a very nuanced discussion of these themes. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, both religious studies scholars and editors of *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, bring together various researchers who expand the theoretical and geographical limits of the field.


All contributions critically engage with Wouter F. Hanegraaff's definition of esotericism, who describes esotericism as an essentially Western form of rejected knowledge. Still, the authors move beyond pure criticism and develop unique new perspectives. The contributions are informed by a wide array of historical examples, ranging from late antique Neoplatonism to modern consumer culture, and the implementation of theoretical frameworks like postcolonial and queer theory. Therefore, the book is a stimulating read for all academics concerned with esotericism, as the collection of articles points to productive new lines of research.

In the introduction, "Esotericism's Expanding Horizon: Why This Book Came to Be," Asprem and Strube discuss the concept of Western esotericism, recounting its history and pointing out its currently limiting effect on research. Even in these sketches, they make a strong point for their respective programs, studying esotericism as part of global religious history and critical research of narratives of marginalization found in esoteric discourses. The question of the supposed Western character of esotericism is also taken up in many of the following articles from different perspectives.

The first article, "Receptions of Revelations: A Future for the Study of Esotericism and Antiquity" by Dylan Burns, explores the connection between the intellectual world of late antiquity and esotericism. The two most compelling propositions in this very dense article are, first, his concept of reception history in studying how the antique authorities became part of esoteric tradition building rather than reproducing the claims made by esotericists. While this seems like a promising project, Burns sometimes shies away from its consequences, and could be more critical of specific categories, e. g., the "Platonic Underworld." The second research perspective seeks to examine texts of the various religious traditions of the Mediterranean region, including those labelled the "Platonic Underworld," from the perspective of

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different claims to revelatory authority. Going beyond Burns' proposal, I would suggest broadening the focus of this research perspective by including for example material from Iran, which was economically, militarily, and culturally in close exchange with the Mediterranean world of late antiquity. Comparison with claims of revelatory authority in Zoroastrian texts like the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* could enhance our picture significantly.

Julian Strube's article "Towards the Study of Esotericism without the 'Western': Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History" is probably the volume's most radical departure from the hegemonic perspective in the field, but he also most clearly formulates his counterprogram, informed by global history and the genealogical approach advanced by Michael Bergunder. Strube argues for dropping the qualifier 'Western,' and he shows convincingly how esotericism is better understood as the product of complex global networks. Its emphasis on the agency of non-Western actors makes it a promising approach that will not only open new fields of research but also, as Strube points out, inspire a revision of existing historiographies, such as that of the Theosophical Society. Beyond that, he pleads for a historicization of the term esotericism itself instead of reifying it as a category prior to the 19th century. Even for researchers who do not wish to agree to this approach, this critique should at least prompt reflection on their use of the term.

The following articles critically engage with Western esotericism's supposed existence as a phenomenon *sui generis* from a more historical perspective: Liana Saif explores Islam and its relationship with the study of Western Esotericism. She demonstrates how the latter's views on the former are mainly shaped through reliance on traditionalist and perennialist writings, which facilitated a specific construction of Islamic Esotericism in the field. This should be a wake-up call beyond the study of esotericism, given the still prevalent recourse to, e. g., Henry Corbin in different lines of religious studies. Mariano Villalba highlights how very specific eurocentrism led to the exclusion of the Iberian colonial empires and the Iberian Peninsula from discussions of the history of esotericism. While Saif operates with a broader understanding of esotericism, Villalba is mainly focused on the agency of racialized subjects self-consciously participating in esoteric discourse, thereby strengthening his point against a supposed simple diffusion of these currents in the former European colonies. The article by Keith Cantú explores and problematizes the category of authenticity in the study of esotericism and Yoga Studies. Cantú shows how scholarly constructions of authentic traditions blocked the view on Indigenous mediators of knowledge in colonial times and their importance for the reception of yoga in occultist circles in Europe and North America and offers trans locality as a counter model to the authentic/unauthentic dichotomy.

The problems linked to the concept of esotericism are brought back into the centre of the discussion by Egil Asprem. In "Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality" he criticizes the definition of esotericism as rejected knowledge. Asprem differentiates between a "strict" and "wide" version of the rejection narrative, both present in the work of Hanegraaff. The first is occupied with concrete historical processes of disqualifying and marginalizing knowledge, the second claims a structural rejection of esotericism lying at the core of Western culture. Asprem not only gives a methodological critique of the grand narrative, but also draws attention to the problematic metapolitical program Hanegraaff develops from it. By building on this reasoning, Asprem opens new perspectives for research: Firstly, he points out that in the study of esotericism, the focus on "white male literati" (p. 138) has produced rejected knowledge itself, like popular forms of esotericism. Secondly, he explains how rejection processes can become themselves subjects not of definitory but historical study. Thirdly he calls for research into the claims of marginalization found in esoteric discourse. Together with

Strube's article, Aspren's contribution most clearly combines a thorough critique with developing a new outlook for the field.

The following articles are devoted to reflecting on marginalized perspectives in the study of esotericism: Justine Bakker, like Villalba, argues for the importance of race as a category shaping esoteric discourse beyond the more obvious forms of racist thought. Her approach draws from critical race studies, calling for reflexivity on the researcher's side. Bakker's examples from the 19th- and 20th-century United States show how a focus on race can bring the study of esotericism into a discussion with other current lines of research and broaden our understanding of the subject. Hugh R. Page's and Stephen C. Finley's contribution to the volume is the most unconventional. While also problematizing race as shaping experiences and forms of knowledge, they do so from the vantage point of *Africana* Esoteric Studies. Their article gives room to a more activist perspective, employing flash non-fiction, a form of presentation supposed to blur "the boundaries between scholarship and resistance" (p. 177). Manon Hedenborg White adds another dimension of exclusion to be reflected on, namely gender, which she engages with through the lens of queer theory. Her contribution to the volume analyses several Thelemic rituals and asks how femininity is performed in them, showing how individual constructions of femininity can inform personal interpretations of ritual performances.

Susanna Crockford's contribution to the volume opens another perspective: While she also questions the narrative of rejected knowledge, Crockford looks at the intersections of neoliberal self-optimization, commodification, and global spirituality. This view, informed by an analysis of power structures, leads her to ask for research into the socio-economic context of claims to secrecy.

The final article by Dimitry Okropiridze returns to the problem of defining esotericism from a philosophical perspective. After systematizing epistemological criticism against different research perspectives, Okropiridze argues not for a harmonization—which would be logically impossible—of the different approaches but for oscillating between ones that understand 'esotericism' as a product of human thought (e. g., through discourse theory) and others claiming the autonomous existence of knowable objects. As noted by Okropiridze, this approach points far beyond the problem at hand to the more significant difficulties of any theory of interpretation.

In their afterword, fittingly titled "Outlines of a New Roadmap," Strube and Aspren tie together the variety of approaches and topics covered in the volume, calling for a critical reassessment of esotericism as part of global religious history, reflexivity in research, and showing the possibilities of dialogue with other fields. In my opinion, the contributions clearly demonstrate how following the older line of research produces not only misrepresentations, like those pointed out by Dylan Burns for Neoplatonism, but blind spots in our understanding of the history of esotericism, as e. g., Villalba and Saif demonstrate for the Spanish Empire and the Islamic world respectively. The criticism brought forward can only enrich the study of esotericism.

About the author

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