“That I Did Love the Moor to Live with Him”: Islam in/and the Study of “Western Esotericism”

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In recent years, the field of “Western esotericism” has been confronted by problems related to the cultural and regional demarcations it has adopted. This field is based on a *longue durée* narrative that underplays non-“Western” currents, including ones which, through appropriation or reactions to them, constituted major sources for it. One of the most immediate arguments against the use of the qualifier “Western” and an essentialized “West” is European entanglements with Islamdom. This article tackles the ambiguous place given to Islam in the narrative of “Western esotericism” and the wider intellectual and historical complex that feeds the exclusionary tendencies expressed by the “Western” in “Western esotericism.” It begins by providing a historical background of the West versus East divide in order to grasp the genealogy of the discourse and locate the problems resulting from an esotericism labelled as “Western.” Two major components of this narrative within which Islam is usually evoked are then highlighted: first, the sanitization of orientalist perspectives, and, second, the reliance on perennialist sources, especially the writings of Henry Corbin. Finally, the article recommends, on one level, a reflective global approach that takes into account the agency of non-Western actors in the globalization of values and concepts in modern and pre-modern eras, thus allowing us to engage in more suitable comparative practices in the study of esotericism. On another level, I have argued elsewhere that an Islamic esotericism (*bāṭinīyya*) has a long history dating back to the ninth century at least, based on principles, epistemological paradigms, and social orientations, conceptualized and negotiated (Saif, 2019). I demonstrated there, as I do here, that this esotericism had—and still has—connections with the currents discussed in the study of “Western esotericism,” especially through the Traditionalists and Sufism.

1 Historicizing the West-East Divide

The premise upon which the argument of this chapter rests is that “West” and “East” are ever-shifting constructs based primarily on political, cultural, and economic aspirations of different groups at specific periods of time (Bonnnett,

2004, p. 8). Aspiration here is understood as social, economic, and political motivations for the cultivation of group power (Appadurai, 2004, pp. 60–63). Movements of ideas, people, goods, and texts largely follow these aspirations. Therefore, the field's historical grounding is unstable from the outset, because it fails to clarify what is “Western” about it and according to whom, which also implies ambiguous ideas about what is then “Eastern.” The general tendency to view Islam as limited to the East also connotes that the Islamic experience is geographically confined there, thus overlooking Islamic religious and esoteric experiences in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. Nevertheless, it is important to historicize the binary of East versus West itself, in broad lines at least, in order to demonstrate the fruitful venues for refining the study of esotericism beyond a historically and politically unreflective and monolithic “West,” as well as how this binary has been constructed in the Islamic context.

A collective identity requires outsiders, cultivated through cultural transactions, necessitating friction and the creation of fiction regarding the Other (Webb, 2016, p. 11). In discussing Arabic-Islamic views of the Latin West during the Middle Ages, Daniel König stresses that there are certain “standardizing forces” based on self-identification and perception of alterity that must not be understood in terms of “Othering” only, but in terms of multiple perspectives in different times and directions: military, political, economic, intellectual, religious, personal, emotional, and other forms of relations (König, 2015, p. 23). For example, early Islamic texts from the fifth to the seventh centuries suggest that the worldview of the pre-expansionist Arabs was confined to what is now recognized as “the Middle East” (König, 2015, p. 35). Expansion to the Iberian Peninsula and central Asia transformed this perspective. The earliest description of Europe (*Urūfā*) from the ninth century presents it as “containing Andalusia, the lands of the Slavs, Byzantines, Franks, and Tangier till the borders of Egypt” (Ibn Khordābeh, 1889, p. 155). Islamic cultures of “the east” considered themselves as of the “west” in relation to South East Asia through to China when trade with these areas was heavy. Interactions with Buddhism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism had in turn a deep influence on Mediterranean Islamicate cultures, including their religious traditions, movements, and ideas that could be regarded as esoteric. This same political and economic aspiration created channels and pools of entanglement. Muslims of al-Andalus were viewed as part of *al-maghreb*, meaning “the west,” while the Muslim-dominant regions of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Persia were called *al-mashriq*, “the east” (Lazáro, 2013, pp. 260–264).

The conquest of al-Andalus acquainted Arab-Muslims with the ‘lands of the Franks’ (*bilād al-ifranja*, *bilād al-fīranj*) which only received an Arabic name

in the course of expansion at the beginning of the eighth century. The term 'Gaul' (*ghaliyya*, *ghalish*) became an alternative regional toponym when the first Arabic paraphrase of Orosius's *Historiae adversus paganos* was produced at the end of the ninth century or the beginning of the tenth. Regions lying further, such as the British Isles, the Slavic world, and Scandinavia, do not appear in the earliest ninth-century accounts of westerly expansion, despite being mentioned in Arabic-Islamic works based on Ptolemaic geography (König, 2015, pp. 43–44). Nevertheless, there were no incentives to engage systematically with these regions in the early medieval period. Furthermore, the limited intellectual investment in romance languages likely contributed to the creation of a sense of cultural divide (König, 2015, p. 81). There was also a lack of ideological motivations to expand to these regions (König, 2015, p. 92). However, Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Church remained a sore spot for Islamic rule, which ended with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 under the reign of Mehmed II, also known as Mehmed the Conqueror (König, 2015, p. 42). With a strong westward gaze, he consolidated the expansionist projects of his predecessors in Western Anatolia, the Serbian and Bosnian kingdoms, the Genoese and Venetian lands, and the Wallachian and Moldovian principalities (Kafadar, 1994, pp. 595–7).

In premodern Eurasia, it was not only imperial and dynastic projects that determined the orientation of aspirations; cultural and religious identities were often formed in multiple directions at the same time. For example, the term *Mashriqiyyūn*, the Easterners, also designated the Persian or Nestorian Church (al-Maqrīzī, 1998, 4: p. 401), and those along with the Jews of al-Andalus, Egypt, Greater Syria or Mesopotamia, some of whom converted to Islam, contributed to the intellectual transfers between eastern and western regions. They became an integral part of Arabic-Islamic societies (König, 2015, p. 44). Although, as König notes, the divide is exacerbated by the fact that Christian communities of Egypt, Greater Syria, and Mesopotamia had come into being in the vast regions of the Roman Empire; "they preserved a memory of imperial unity and the process of Christianization and occasionally kept a record of relations with the Latin West from the pre-Islamic into the Islamic period, e.g. with the Bishop of Rome" (König, 2015, p. 44).

Blocked by the Atlantic Ocean in the west, European aspirations and anxieties of self-definition could only be formulated in relation to the east initially (Wintle, 2005, pp. 63–75). This is also reflected by medieval European T-O maps with the three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe, with Africa and Europe occupying the west, and Asia, the largest continent, occupying the east. This scheme integrated the biblical account of human population descending from the three sons of Noah: Asia–Shem, Africa–Ham, and Europe–Japeth,

creating a racial template that served as a model well into the nineteenth century (Villalba, 2021). As Suzanne Akbari writes, “the purpose of all these schemes, however variable, was to impose order on the abundant heterogeneity of creation, to gain control over the world by fitting it into an intellectually coherent system.” This order implies the erasure of human agency and that racial and ethnic variations are divinely decreed (Akbari, 2009, pp. 20–1). As a result, Bartholomeus Anglicus, in his thirteenth-century account of the divisions of the continents among the sons of Noah, following Isidore of Seville, states that the heat of the Sun discolors the children of Africa, causing weak humors and black faces. Contrary to these are “men of the northe londe” whose cold temperatures make men huge due to their strong humors. People of Asia, “and here first londe is by eeste,” have mediocre dispositions (Akbari, 2009, pp. 41, 47).

Then, as today, Christian-European identities were, to a significant extent, formed against the most immediate geographical and ideological “neighbor,” whose profile is different enough to be othered, but similar and interlinked enough to be perceived as a threat to a Euro-Christian autonomy: near eastern Muslim-dominant regions. As Akbari notes, “medieval constructions conflated categories of ethnicity and religion within a single term that served as a marker of both”: the Saracen, a term rarely used to identify Christian Arabs (Akbar, 2009, p. 155). By the early modern period, with the failure of the Crusades and the fall of Byzantium to the Ottomans in 1453, military and intellectual engagement with Muslim-dominant regions became less intense. Moreover, smoother social integration of Christians and Jews contributed to the relatively quick decline of the missionary incentives of Muslim expansionism after the death of Muhammad, becoming more about the inflation of dynastic power (König, 2015, p. 60, 92).

The colonial expeditions to the Americas partially re-oriented European economic, ideological, and political objectives (Villalba, 2021). Furthermore, race was gradually being understood in terms of blood rather than climes and continents, and maps were becoming more mimetic. The Saracen is replaced by the Turk and the Moor. From there onwards, especially in the nineteenth century, a renewed imperial and colonial aspiration lead to the subjugation of regions across the globe to fuel a sense of a Western autonomous power that marches toward a modernity on the basis of rationality, industrial and technological monopoly, and “a kind of intellectual apartheid regime in which the superior West is quarantined off from the inferior East” (Ernst, 2010, p. 25). Now, there is “the West,” “the East,” and of course “the Rest.”

Since the medieval period, then, the relationship of the “West” to Muslim-dominant regions in the “Near East” has been determined by complex os-

cillating dynamics. Dissociation (othering) is responsible for cementing fictional cultural boundaries; and competition is over economic—natural and human—resources and the legitimacy of one "Abrahamic" religion over the other. Finally, this shared intellectual and religious heritage simultaneously allowed for establishing connected networks between the two "worlds." The "Islamic world" is as fictional as "the West," from the medieval period till our days; however, these terms resulted to a great extent from imperial expansion and colonialism, making them containers for entrenched narratives that in turn shaped those who experienced and reacted to them. In our case, this is demonstrable by the fact that "Western esotericism" is historically a nineteenth-century polemical term adopted by esotericists and occultists in opposition to the "orientally" inspired Theosophical Society (Strube, 2017; Strube, 2021).

The neglect of Islamic materials in the study of Western esotericism reinforces the West/Islam divide, seeing them as separate and homogenous identities (Ernst, 2010, p. 23). Like nationalism, Western-centrism—which also often excludes nations and cultures from the Americas, East Europe, and the Balkans, while including some Australasian nations—has "blinded us to the possibility of connection, and historical ethnography, whether in one of its western variants of high Orientalism, or whether practised in the East, has aided and abetted this unfortunate process" (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 761). Despite Antoine Faivre's very brief, one-paragraph acknowledgement of "other non-Christian traditions" that include "Arabic intellectual activity," and despite his equally short discussion of "Esotericism in Medieval Thought," the accepted *longue durée* of Western esoteric currents has no substantial references to Arabic or medieval connections (Faivre, 1994, pp. 52–3; Hanegraaff, 2013, pp. 18–44; Hanegraaff, 2012; for Arabic and other medieval connections, see Saif, 2015). This is reflected in the dominating view within the field of Western esotericism that Islamic and Jewish traditions are seen to "have emerged and developed as largely self-contained and relatively autonomous traditions" (Hanegraaff, 2013, p. 15), or seeing the West as the "occident *visited* by Judaism and Islam" (Faivre, 2006, p. 208; my italics).

As I show below, even when this is directly challenged, Islam is still viewed through perennialist and Traditionalist perspectives, often reproducing orientalist tropes such as overemphasizing "sober" and "learned" Sufism as the only Islamic esoteric current, or favoring the ideas of Muslim intellectuals, such as al-Suhrawardī, whose thought was brought forward due to a perceived compatibility with *philosophia perennis* (von Stuckrad, 2010, pp. 25–26).

2 “Platonic Orientalism”

In addition to the ideology of domination that moves Orientalist discourse, the essentialized Orient has also been a romantic ideation, creating such tropes as the “wise barbarian.” It is troubling to see that a “sanitized” version of this persists in the study of Western esotericism and is even defended. John Walbridge in his *Wisdom of the Mystic East* historicizes the concept of the wise barbarian, especially the “Persian sage,” exemplified by Herodotus’s *History of the Persian Wars*. He notes that Persian wisdom is recorded in Greek texts on occult sciences, especially in relation to Zoroaster, Hystaspes, and Ostanes. Other foreign groups were interesting to the Greeks: Egyptians, Jews, Indians, Celts, etc. (Walbridge, 2001, p. 5). As a result, Walbridge defines Platonic Orientalism as “this fascination with the exotic, and especially with the *Oriental* [which] was particularly pronounced among the philosophers of the Pythagorean and Platonic traditions, the so-called Italian school” (Walbridge, 2001, pp. 8–9). According to Dylan Burns, “Platonic Orientalism” also refers to a growing sense of a pan-Hellenic identity which melded the primordial wisdom of the East, (that is, “non-Greek”) with Pythagoreanized Platonism, influenced by “pilgrimages to the Orient to obtain scientific and ritual knowledge” (Burns, 2014, p. 20; cf. Burns, 2021). According to this construction of this ancient “orientalism,” “the Orient” represented an adherence to allegorical and symbolic interpretations of revelatory and experiential modes of obtaining knowledge on Being, in addition to commitments to “theurgy” and “white magic” (Walbridge, 2001, pp. 11–12). Wouter Hanegraaff adopts this notion to highlight that for Renaissance thinkers, Plato was seen, through the lens of “Platonic Orientalism,” as “gnostic, hermetic, and theurgical” (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 12). It would be “un-platonic” for Renaissance thinkers not to be adherents of *philosophia perennis* (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 16). For Walbridge, as for Hanegraaff, al-Suhrawardī and to some degree Ibn Sīnā are awkwardly and arbitrarily placed as the conduits of symbolic and allegorical “Platonic Orientalist” philosophy to the “West” as represented by intellectuals such as Plethon, Marsilio Ficino, and even Corbin (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 33–34; Walbridge, 2001, p. 13). Included as a component of “cultural transfers,” it perpetuates a narrative that is widely criticized; namely, “white” civilizational narratives that see Islam as a “carrier civilization”: which starts in Greece and classical Rome, whose philosophical and aesthetic legacies are revived in the Renaissance with “the West” now no longer needing the mediation of Islamic sciences; then it arrives at the “Scientific Revolution,” followed by the Enlightenment; a narrative which eulogizes the successful rise of “the West,” and the decline of the “Muslim world” (Asad, 2003, pp. 168–9).

In addition to the narrowness of this view of Islamic philosophy's developments in theorizing revelatory and intellectual modes of knowing, "Platonic Orientalism" is deeply problematic in many ways. None of the classical sources cited by Wallbridge, Hanegraaff, and Burns refer to the "Orient" as such, in the homogenizing sense that warrants the label "Orientalism," rendering "Platonic Orientalism" inaccurate at best (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 15). More problematic is the deliberate avoidance of engaging with literature on Orientalism, via Edward Said or others. Hanegraaff in a footnote writes: "'Platonic Orientalism' is a new coinage, independent of the famous work of Edward Said" (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 15n13). However, they simply cannot be separated. Orientalism is:

A manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient. The Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways. The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire. (Said, 1978, p. 202)

On the other hand, Burns engages with Said's conceptualization and takes advantage of the similarities; namely, that here we have the Greeks with a sense of group identity that creates an inferior Other. He also shows that "Platonic Orientalism" is not a fixed and even phenomenon among the Greeks. For example, Diogenes Laertius, Philostratus, Celsus, and others insisted that the origin of all the knowledge non-Greeks excelled at belong to the primordial Greeks. Even Porphyry and Iamblichus subordinated non-Greek wisdom to Platonic and Pythagorean traditions (Burns, 2014, pp. 22–5). Elsewhere, Burns also notes the fictional nature of many of these ideas about non-Greeks (Burns, 2006, pp. 158–9n4). Nevertheless, although the Platonic fascination with apocryphal Chaldeans, Magi, Babylonians, and Egyptians is similar to the fantasy of the Orient in Orientalist discourse, it is not identical. One of the prerequisites of a discourse centered on the term "Orientalism" is the genesis of a "Western" consciousness that contrasts with a projected East or Orient, which, as mentioned earlier, is not found in the cases used by Wallbridge, Hanegraaff, and Burns.¹ The tenacity of such a perspective is emblematic of the lack of engagement with debates on colonial and imperialistic frameworks inherited

1 By now, postcolonial studies have shed light on many of the issues that outdate some elements of Said's argument. One of these critical responses pertain to the essentializing of the "occident" (Baruma and Margalit, 2004, p. 10). However, as Ernst states, "It should be

from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; debates that are central to other major fields, as is argued in some more detail in the contribution to the present volume by Julian Strube.

In an article from 2013, Kennet Granholm posits a “positive orientalism” that stretches back to ancient times. It is contrasted with “standard orientalism” which creates an exotic other, measured against “inherent European values”; while the former is said to be a “fascination with that which is far away and exotic.” Platonic Orientalism is subsumed under “positive orientalism,” which Granholm seems to imply is less problematic (Granholm, 2013, pp. 22–3). However, access to the sources of the “romantic” and “positive” Orient is facilitated by the violence of colonialism. Granholm’s concept is influenced by another over-emphasized arbitrary dyad; namely, administrative-political orientalism (bad) and intellectual-aesthetic orientalism (harmless) (Kaiwar and Mazumdar, 2009, p. 19). However, this type of rehabilitating “Orientalism” remains unconvincing, for in our case most “Western esoteric” currents from the nineteenth century onwards were themselves part of colonial power dynamics as is demonstrated in the case of the Theosophical Society (Strube, 2021, pp. 48–51). This esoteric Orientalism demoted the beliefs, convictions, and practices of the majority of people, often deeming them superstitious and irrational, part of an “Islam,” for example, construed as a spiritually bereft “religion.” It generates apocryphal histories of ancient religions that permeate the air of the Orient (Sijbrand, 2013, pp. 5–7; Masuzawa, 2005, p. 20).

3 The Corbinian Perspective within “Western Esotericism”

Even when concessions are made, Islam is viewed through a West-centric and orientalist lens. In the West, the reduction of “esoteric Islam” to Sufism resulted largely from the initial Traditionalist coining of the term “l’ésotérisme islamique” with its perennialist focus on Sufism. This view was deeply influential on the scholarship of Henry Corbin (1903–1978). Due to his perceived position as the bridge between Islamic “mystical” thought and European explorations of esotericism, his biases are transferred into much of the research that calls for the inclusion of Islam in the study of esotericism, as this section will demonstrate. At work here is the aforementioned ahistoricity of the

emphasized that Orientalism and Occidentalism do not exist on the same level. There is a hierarchal and asymmetrical power relation between the two. Occidentalists do not have colonies in Europe and America” (Ernst, 2010, pp. 29–30).

"West" and "East" in the field of Western esotericism demonstrated by the relationship between Corbin and the works of the philosophers Ibn Sīnā and al-Suhrawardī, who have become the Muslim favorites within "Western esotericism."

The following exemplifies this distortion and its adoption in relation to the selective understanding of the "East's" relation to the "West". Another use for the term "eastern" in the Islamicate world described the region and cultural setting of Khurasan (northeast of Iran) in relation to Iraq to the west (Gutas, 2014, p. 140n40). The lost and enigmatic work of the philosopher Ibn Sīnā, *The Easterners* (*al-Mashriqiyyūn*), juxtaposes the indigenous Aristotelian philosophical tradition of his homeland with Baghdadi Aristotelian philosophical traditions (Gutas, 2014, p. 129). Here lies an interesting case of interpretive fancy which saw in this lost work a more "esoteric" meaning, due in part to its reception by al-Suhrawardī, founder of Illuminationist philosophy (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*). Along with Ibn Sīnā, he formed the nexus of Islamic esotericism in the thought of perennialists and religionists, such as Corbin.

For Corbin, the title *The Easterners* is understood as an expression of "Oriental philosophy," which expounds an ancient wisdom centering on divine emanations. Persian-Muslim philosophers revived it against the tide of the "rationalistic" and technical Aristotelian traditions of Baghdad (Arabs) (Corbin, 1960, pp. xii, 258–61; Fakhry, 1982; Nasr, 1964, pp. 60–30). This "Oriental philosophy" overemphasizes the "mystical" and (neo-)Platonic, for nothing indicates that Ibn Sīnā had substantial "mystical" or "esoteric" objectives behind this work, beyond a reinstatement of the Khurasanian school of Aristotelian philosophy, as it was actually understood by al-Suhrawardī himself (Gutas, 2014, p. 140; Gutas, 2000; Pourjavady, 2013). In Corbin's case, *ishrāq* (illumination) and *mashriq* (east) are conflated to present Ibn Sīnā as a forerunner of the Illuminationist school, serving perennialist (Western) appropriation of Islamic philosophical and esoteric knowledge. In *Avicenna and the Visionary Recitals*, Corbin writes:

In Iran it is customary to divide philosophers into *Mashsha'un*, Peripatetics or disciples of Aristotle, and *Ishraqiyun*, theosophists of Ishraq or of the Orient of Pure Lights [...]. Thus considered in the life of individual consciousnesses, the "Oriental philosophy" of the two masters reveals what they have in common, far better than any theoretical discussions, or hypotheses deputizing for lost works, can do. For the two canons, that of the one [al-Suhrawardī] and that of the other master [Ibn Sīnā], display this common trait: side by side with extremely solid systematic works, they both contain a cycle of brief spiritual romances, narratives of inner

initiations, marking a rupture of plane with the level on which the patencies successively acquired by theoretical expositions are interconnected. (Corbin, 1960, p. 6)

The language here clearly betrays an orientalist/colonial (re)ordering of Islamic religious history itself: “canon”, “romances”, and “narratives” articulated for European ends. As Harun Küçük points out, Islam understood transhistorically “led to conclusions about the very nature of religion, and of Christianity, that were as valid in the middle ages as they were in nineteenth-century Europe” (Küçük, 2011, pp. 111–112). To a large extent, Corbin’s perspective has been deeply influenced by Traditionalist and perennial conceptualization of Islam and Islamic esotericism that follow such tendencies.

The first to speak of “l’ésotérisme islamique” is the French Traditionalist René Guénon (1886–1951). His construction is based on the conviction that there is a rift between the primordial tradition of the Orient and the spiritually bereft Occident. For Guénon, Islamic esotericism is a pure self-evolving tradition while being simultaneously universal in the sense that all kinds of traditions and *ṭuruq* (paths) lead to the Truth (Guénon, 1973, pp. 1–8). This view was as critical of popular Sufi practices, for example, as Wahhabi reformists were, while simultaneously elevating a “sober” variety of Sufism, largely imagined as textual and learned (van Bruinessen, 2009, *passim*, esp. 126–7). At the same time, Guénon was employing concepts that are indeed present in the discourse on esoteric knowledge (*al-bāṭiniyya*) since early medieval times; such as the tension between seeking Truth (*ḥaqīqa*) and abiding by Law (*sharīʿa*) (Saif, 2019, pp. 18–31).

In addition to limiting Islamic esotericism to Sufism, Traditionalist perspectives played a major role in attending to Sufi texts that are seen as “more elegant and polished,” and that are of “text-induced lustre,” than the “popular *taṣawwuf*” that emerges from observing the more day-to-day quotidian aspects which would mar its exoticism and mystery (Knysh, 2019, p. 59). Indeed, Sufism “serves as a meeting place of discourses and imaginations, both Muslim and Western,” whether in the way the former sometimes reproduces the latter’s orientalist abstractions, especially when Sufism is denounced as “heterodox” in modern times, or due to the censure of traditionalist groups that see it as deviation (Knysh, 2019, p. 58). It is true, also, that attempts at assigning authenticity to one and not the other is a fruitless distraction. However, it remains valid that in attempts to study esotericism in Islam or the study of Western esotericism, the focus on Sufism only has resulted in part from Western intellectual dismissive attitude towards local lived religions, seeing in them a corruption of a pure Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.

While Guénon applies "Islamic esotericism" to Sufism, Corbin almost exclusively intends Shī'ī esotericism, referred to as *'irfān*—often translated as 'gnosis'—to distinguish it from its Sunni variant, *taṣawwuf* (Sufism). The former is envisaged to be a Persian achievement (Corbin, 1991, pp. 186–218, i, xiv). Corbin rejects the identification of Islamic "spirituality" with Sunni Islam (i.e. "orthodoxy," according to Corbin) and Sufism, for Shī'ī esotericism and spirituality outrank (*déborderer*) those of Sufism (Corbin, 1991, p. iii). This is a symptom of approaches in the study of Islamic religious movements that adopt the binary of orthodoxy versus heterodoxy. For the most part, they are employing anachronistic criteria often imposed on the religious experience of the colonized. The binary has proven to be tenacious in non-Muslim as well as Muslim audiences, resulting in the over-simplification of the ideological topography of Islam, for example, pitting a scripturalist Islam, mainly Sunnism, against the hermeneutic methods of esotericists, rationalists, philosophers, and saints. According to Corbin, it is "non-Islamic," non-Arabic, and generally "Aryan" influences—Zoroastrianism, for example—that validated his own perception of Shī'a Islam, elevated over Sufism and Sunnism, leading him to celebrate its "heterodoxy" (Adams, 2001, pp. 134–41; Knysh, 1993, pp. 48–67; Knysh, 2019, pp. 54–58; Saif, 2019, pp. 30–31). Once Islamic esotericism had become espoused with a kind of romantic Persianophilia, it came to be Shī'ī-oriented to Western eyes.

The representation of Sufism as the only esoteric current in Islam (Traditionalists) and "heterodoxy" as the criterion of inclusion into the category of "esotericism" (Corbin) has become characteristic of the limited discussion of Islam in the study of Western esotericism (Bergunder, 2010, p. 17). Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, in *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*, very briefly nods at "East-West exchanges and shared traditions" that for him culminate in the figure of Corbin who, after spending many years in Turkey and Iran, "assimilat[ed] the esoteric imaginaries of Sufi and Persian spirituality," inspiring a generation of Arabic scholars "whose work on Islamic mysticism has entered Western academic discourse" (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008, p. 5). In addition to the terminological conflations (mysticism, esoteric, spirituality), here Corbin is seen to function as the conduit to the very study of Islamic "mysticism" and its "entry" into Western scholarship, without making mention of any of those "Arabic" scholars or the works of non-Western scholars in the twentieth century whose research was independent of Corbin. This amply shows the narrow West-centric view of Islam in the field of Western esotericism. The reliance on a Corbinian approach is also evident in Haneegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy*, which suggests that "Ficino's own approach was closer to the one highlighted by Henry Corbin with reference to

Suhrawardī, i.e. that of the various ancient sages (and their contemporary adherents) as ‘members of one spiritual family’ who are connected simply by virtue of their participation in the same metaphysical worldview” (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 49n194). Despite the field’s rejection of the religionist approach characteristic of the Eranos group (Corbin, Eliade, etc.), religionism persists in the study of Western esotericism to taint the narrative by uncritical engagement with Corbin when it comes to Islam (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 299–302).

Criticism of the exclusion of Jewish and Islamic esoteric traditions from the grand narrative of Western esotericism was voiced by Kocku von Stuckrad, who pointed out the problematic notion of a West merely “visited” by Judaism and Islam (von Stuckrad, 2010, pp. 19–20). However, von Stuckrad’s own treatment of the subject is superficial (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 71–2). He exemplifies the Islamic tradition with al-Suhrawardī almost exclusively, attributing to him “the establishment of a philosophical system that integrated rational modes of demonstration with experiential modes of gaining truth, the latter being itself part of a demonstrable system of interpretation” (von Stuckrad, 2010, pp. 83–88). This is not unique to al-Suhrawardī and was developed by thinkers and esotericists before him (Saif, 2017, pp. 297–345).

4 New Approaches

From the problems discussed so far, it becomes clear that the current dominant approach to Islam in the study of Western esotericism is not sustainable. Nevertheless, one of the most important contributions by the field is questioning the post-Enlightenment epistemological framework that tends to discredit esoteric movements and occult philosophies and practices for not subscribing to an idealized notion of rationality (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 157).

However, the critique of the Enlightenment must not leave unchallenged European hegemony, its “civilizing” objectives, the privileging of the West-centric project of modernity (Seixas, 2007, pp. 24–5), and the resulting and inherited methodological chauvinism that disregards the contributions of women, people of color, sexual minorities, etc. (Legêne, 2007, pp. 188–204; van Stipriaan, 2007, pp. 205–219). Furthermore, the fruitful challenges in writing a *longue durée* are not taken up fully, such as confronting the intensification of global interconnectedness in the early modern *and* modern periods (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 745; Moyn and Sartori, 2013, p. 23). With distrust of religionist models and apprehension toward a more global study of esotericism turning “into a form of comparative religious studies that seeks to discover the universalia of ‘inner’ religion world-wide” (Hanegraaff, 2012, p. 15), the existence

of other forms of esotericism is gravely underestimated, often on the basis that a comparative study is supposedly "doctrinal" and not historiographical (Hanegraaff, 2012, pp. 6, 126). This also stems from the tendency to view historical categories and typological concepts as mutually exclusive (Asprem, 2014, pp. 5, 9–11).

Western post-Enlightenment rationality is understood to privilege Kantian intellectual individualism, Cartesian notions of natural sciences, empiricism, industrialization, and the exclusion of non-Western knowledge production and non-Western agencies in globalizing "the normative values associated with 'the West' at the same time as they were challenging Western imperial hegemony" (Conrad, 2016, pp. 73–4; Cemil, 2013, pp. 73–4; Purakayastha, 2014; Pyenson, 1993). In the first place, however, the European Enlightenment cannot be thought of as something of the past only, but a process that has been generating philosophical and epistemological stances with a view of progress that destabilizes the role of "religion," favoring scientific developments instead. The resulting standards of modernity and rationality are still negotiated, so is an individual's or a group's positionality within this process. As Siep Stuurman explains:

The Enlightenment is not a finished ideology of high modernity, but a set of critical reflections upon an emergent European modernity. It is not a neat package of ideas but a series of debates and polemics, held together by some broad common themes and axioms, but also torn apart by competing and conflicting conceptual languages and knowledge claims. (Stuurman, 2007, p. 80)

One way whereby non-Western negotiations of rationality and modernity is undermined in the narrative of "Western esotericism" is by confusing "global" with "universal" (Hanegraaff, 2015, pp. 64–66; Asprem, 2014, p. 8, 20–1; Strube, 2021, pp. 52–55). A global approach rejects traditional geographic units and calls attention toward zones of interaction which can be geographical and also chronological: where and when intellectual exchanges occurred and contributed to the (re)shaping of global trends and values. Universalism overlooks cultural variants and political contexts; global history emphasizes them and sheds light on the networks of association and reference between them (Strube, 2021, pp. 56–62). Concepts which often become the elements that make the common ground of global comparison and serve as *tertium comparationis*, are retrieved from European prototypes embedded in nineteenth-century methodologies of social sciences. However, as Dipesh Chakrabarty and later Michael Bergunder argue, it is crucial to recognize that the proto-

types have become globalized; therefore, to abandon them would be to dismiss the agency of non-Western actors in this negotiation (Bergunder, 2016, pp. 37–8). As a result, interesting avenues of research are lost since an approach that acknowledges the role of non-Western agents in globalizing values and ideas opens up new sites of entanglement with “the West,” with direct ramifications for esoteric currents. For example, the creedal purity of Islamist revivalists of the early twentieth century, including those who adopted Wahhabi and Salafi theology, was bolstered by expunging “heterodoxy” and “superstition” from a rationalist program of reform (Lauzière, 2016, p. 47). This rationality overtly shuns the occult sciences and dismisses Islamic esoteric currents, deemed as embarrassing and backward superstitions (‘Abd al-Wahhāb, 2008, pp. 30, 34, 80–86). While such positions adopted in essence earlier criticisms, aligning in particular with traditionalist theologians such as Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), in the context of the twentieth century this view takes on an explicit anti-colonial and anti-imperialist dimension (Lauzière, 2016, pp. 48, 118).

Moreover, the negotiation of Western rationality led to the marginalization of esotericism in Muslim-dominant regions. However, it also caused the creation of private and public spaces where new expressions of Islamic esotericism emerged, allowing for the adoption of other strategies of rationalization. In many places of Muslim-dominant regions, the privilege of middle and upper classes secured a level of social immunity and access to Western forms of occult and esoteric currents which led to the surge of Spiritualism, occultism, even Wicca, New Age practices, and Quantum Mysticism (Türesay, 2018; ANR-DFG Neoreligitur Research project; Doostdar, 2018). The latter particularly created a modern process of rationalization that derided traditional occult sciences and esoteric currents, yet elevated those that can be expressed in what is perceived as scientific terms (energy, wavelengths, consciousness, etc.). To some level, this “westernizing” turn contributed even further to the suppression of the traditional occult sciences and esoteric movements, correlating them with the “superstition” and desperation of the lower classes. This highlights modern intrications across the globe, and the political, economic, and social power structures that are, and have been, shaping Islamic esoteric currents according to everchanging discursive constructs of “rationality.”

The historical narrative of Western esotericism also reproduces the post-Enlightenment’s privileging of modernity in the story of “the West,” since it bypasses the middle ages, and gives prominence to European early modernity. Renaissance humanism’s revival of Platonism and Neoplatonism and the discovery of the Hermetic corpus have been considered by a generation of scholars as heralding an occult and esoteric awakening with limited medieval con-

nections (Yates, 2002, p. 18; Garin, 1992, pp. 85–86). However, the intelligibility of the universe, and therefore its "openness" to exoteric and esoteric interpretative models, was a central theme in the natural philosophy of the twelfth century, for instance in the works of Albertus Magnus (1193–1280) and Roger Bacon (1214–92). It also led to scholarship's resistance to consider medieval connected histories between Europe and Muslim-dominant regions, and the intellectual and cultural interlinks. The translation of Arabic philosophical, occult, and esoteric texts had a substantial impact on European medieval and early modern worldviews; most notably, however, their introduction of causal and semiological connections between cosmological and natural dimensions that made the universe intelligible and hidden phenomena knowable (Saif, 2015).

Studies of Western esotericism thus neatly follow the European trajectory of modernity and appeals to Europeanist civilizational narratives that begin in ancient Greece, pass momentarily through the "Islamic world," and then proceed to Western modernity. It is important to question this by delinking modernity and early modernity from this particular European trajectory, considering such legacies as those of Turco-Mongol invasions, in addition to the Counter-Reformation and its missionary drive, and the so-called "Voyages of Discovery" (Subrahmanyam, 1997, pp. 737, 749).

The same approach that utilizes globalized prototypes and local agencies can shift the appreciation of Corbin and Traditionalist authors on Islam from being deficient secondary sources on Islamic esotericism, to primary sources that show an episode of entanglement. This has the benefit of steering us away from either "Corbinophilia" or "Corbinophobia," both tendencies found in Western esotericism and Islamic studies, respectively (van den Bos, 2005, pp. 113–125; Landolt, 1999, pp. 484–490, esp. 489; Green, 2008, pp. 247–259).

Using the Europeanist paradigm of rationality against which "Western esotericism" is strictly understood, and the adherence to a European civilizational trajectory, meant that a non-inclusive *canon* has developed (from Plethon, Ficino, John Dee to Aleister Crowley and the New Age, and so on) (Asprem, 2021). As Siep Stuurman and Maria Grever define it, a canon is "a historical grand narrative, consisting of selected figures, events, story lines, ideas and values, colligated by definite plots, perspectives and explanations" frequently privileging particular political events and personalities, leaving little room for differing and competing perspectives (Stuurman and Grever, 2007, pp. 3–4).

A global contextualization of esoteric currents and the cultural and socio-political structures within which they are formulated enables us to identify the networks where the connection is more intense, thus warranting a special focus, as in the case between different esoteric currents. It also habituates us

to question, and historically and philosophically unpack, the constructs that became essential(ized) in dominant historical interpretations, such as East, West, rationality, etc. "Global history, therefore, has a polemical and political dimension. It constitutes an assault on many forms of container-based paradigms" (Conrad, 2016, pp. 4, 12–13). It is important to ask then who the agents and mediators are that establish networks that defy any "preordained closure" (Moyn and Sartori, 2013, pp. 9, 14).

Curiosity about what is hidden and inaccessible to our immediate senses is a human impulse. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have excited this attraction with hermeneutics characterized by a tension between revealing exoteric realities and alluding to esoteric truths. Processes of othering and relating which this paper highlights also shape what Noah Gardiner labels "the cosmological imaginary" (Gardiner, 2019, p. 737), resulting from occulto-esoteric ideations of connections and difference, which soon play out on land through ever changing rules of sympathy and antipathy to reflect competing sacral, esoteric, and occult topographies. Hence, esotericism stemming from, or reacting to, Islamic traditions cannot be understood fully without referring its various currents to this process of othering and relating.

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