CHAPTER THREE

CONCEPTUALIZING THE STUDY OF ESOTERIC DISCOURSE

Against the background of the two-fold pluralism of European history of religion and the rhetorical or even polemical functions of religious narratives of tradition, I will now turn to the place of esoteric discourse within this conceptual framework. My point is that the study of ‘Western esotericism’ is most successful if it is linked to the general characteristics of European—and, for modernity, to North American\textsuperscript{1}—history of culture.

\textsuperscript{1} The question of whether American cultural and religious history shares the characteristics of European culture is much debated. While some scholars—arguably Burkhard Gladigow and Christoph Auffarth—regard American cultural history as a ‘subchapter’ of European history of religion, in my view the differences are in fact enormous. It is only since the second half of the twentieth century that we can talk of a shared cultural and religious space here, particularly through the reception of American New Age culture in Europe. For early modernity and also for Romanticism, the characteristics found in Europe should not be transferred to North America (and vice versa).
To begin with, ‘esotericism’ is a controversial term. Despite the fact that during the last ten to fifteen years a cornucopia of contributions has led to the emergence of the research field of ‘Western esotericism,’ scholars are still far from agreeing on definitions of esotericism. This does not mean that there also is fundamental disagreement about the currents and historical phenomena that scholars think of when they apply the term ‘esotericism.’ Most scholars share the opinion that esotericism covers such currents as gnosticism, ancient Hermetism, the so-called ‘occult sciences’ (notably astrology, magic, and alchemy), Christian mysticism, Renaissance Hermeticism, Jewish and Christian kabbalah, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism, Christian theosophy, illuminism, nineteenth-century occultism, Traditionalism, and various related currents up to contemporary New Age spiritualities. All these currents are reflected in the Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism (2005), which indeed is an important contribution to esotericism research. But even if scholars—for whatever reason—agree on historical currents that they want to study under the rubric of esotericism, it will be important to answer questions such as the following: what is the rationale behind the selection of currents? Why do we need a general analytic term to study phenomena that are apparently quite diverse (as, e.g., Hermetism, Paracelsianism, or New Age)? Is it sufficient to justify the selection with reference to the fact that “this entire domain was severely neglected by academic research until far into the 20th century”? What about other currents—such as ancient and medieval theurgy, Islamic and Jewish mysticism, or Romantic Naturphilosophie—that likewise “display certain similarities and are historically related” to currents seen as belonging to ‘Western esotericism’? These questions indicate the need to constantly reflect on the biases and presuppositions that underlie academic interpretation.

Due to the problems related to a general concept of esotericism, many scholars choose different terms or apply the term ‘esotericism’ only to a restricted period or context. Bettina Gruber, for instance, makes clear that she is “not interested in any ‘transhistorical’ definition of the phenomena.” Instead, for her such a definition would be “possible, at least with regard to esotericism and occultism, only under certain conditions and at the price of marginalizing functional

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}} \text{ Hanegraaff, “Introduction,” ix.} \]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}} \text{ Hanegraaff, “Esotericism,” 337.}\]