CHAPTER 15

Freemasonry and Western Esotericism

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Approaches to Western Esotericism

As a scholarly construct, Western esotericism has been defined in a number of different ways, but it is the definition of the French historian of religions Antoine Faivre that became the first paradigm, as it were, in the study of Western esotericism, and which came to dominate the field for over a decade.1 In 1992 Faivre proposed that currents such as Hermeticism, Christian Kabbalah, and Rosicrucianism, share a family resemblance and that their common denominator is a specific form of thought or way to interpret man's relation to the universe. This form of thought, claimed Faivre, was shaped during the Renaissance, although many of its roots stretch back to late antiquity. According to Faivre this form of thought is characterised by four intrinsic and two secondary constituting components: First, the idea of correspondences. These are symbolic and concrete correspondences between all the visible and invisible parts of the universe. Everything is interconnected, and man is seen as a microcosm of macrocosm, as a 'hologram' or reflection of the universe, which is expressed famously in the Tabula Smaragdina as “what is below is like that what is above”. Second, the notion of living nature: the entire universe is a living organism traversed by a network of sympathies and antipathies that link all natural things. Nature is a living organism, with a soul of its own, the anima mundi, to which also man's soul is connected. Third, imagination and mediations: to the esotericist the imaginative faculty of man is a key-factor in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Inner pictures, meditation, focused concentration and ecstatic visions are used as means to connect with the Godhead. Related to this is the importance attributed to rituals, symbolic images and intermediary entities between man and the Godhead. Fourth, the experience of transmutation: just as it is assumed possible to transform base metals into gold, so it is also considered possible to refine the spiritual properties in man and to achieve enlightenment, gnosis or Unio Mystica with the Godhead. This transformation is often interpreted as an initiatory process, which leads ‘from

1 This chapter is partly based on Bogdan 2006 and Bogdan 2007a. A shorter version of this chapter was published in Spanish as Bogdan 2011.
darkness to light’, from unitiated profane to initiated adept. In institutionalised forms of esotericism, such as Freemasonry, this initiatory process is often formalised by a degree system through which the candidates encounter step-by-step the symbols which will lead him to the realisation of salvific knowledge or gnosis. The two secondary or relative components are, according to Faivre, often present but do not have to be so in order for something to be called esoteric. The fifth component, the praxis of the concordance is the syncretistic approach to two or more traditions that aims at obtaining a superior illumination. The various esoteric currents are interpreted as leading to the same goal, or as having the same philosophical/spiritual foundation or origin. Sixth, and last, transmission: the esoteric knowledge must be transmitted from a teacher to a pupil (Faivre 1994: 10–15; Faivre 2010: 12–13). This last component is significant for the understanding of initiatic societies such as Freemasonry since it emphasises the importance of transmitting a tradition through rituals of initiation to new generations of members (for a discussion on the construction of tradition in Freemasonry, see Bogdan 2010: 217–238).

The main advantage of Faivre’s typological and heuristic definition of Western esotericism was perhaps not only that it made esotericism a defined (and for the non-specialist understandable) field of research, but also that it proved to be efficient as an analytic approach to the subject itself. From the standpoint of the study of Freemasonry Faivre’s definition can easily be used as an analytical tool to understand many of its aspects. Nevertheless, in the past few years the field has been undergoing a paradigmatic shift in focus and new definitions of esotericism have been put forward by scholars such as Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Kocku von Stuckrad (Hanegraaff 2013; von Stuckrad 2010a). The main criticism against Faivre’s definition of esotericism is, according to von Stuckrad, on the one hand that Faivre is not consistent in how he applies it, and on the other hand that he seems to base it on a limited set of sources, which is composed of Renaissance Hermeticism, Naturphilosophie, Christian kabbalah, and Christian theosophy (von Stuckrad 2010a: 48–49).

Both Hanegraaff and von Stuckrad approach the study of Western esotericism from a similar perspective in which they emphasise the construct of identity and claims to absolute knowledge (gnosis). To Hanegraaff, “Western esotericism is the historical product of a polemical discourse, the dynamics of which can be traced all the way back to the beginnings of monotheism”

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2 There are other scholarly approaches to the study of Western esotericism, although they have not proven to be as influential as those discussed above. See in particular Monika Neugebauer-Wölk and Andre Rudolph (2008); Arthur Versluis (2007); and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (2008).