BEYOND THE YATES PARADIGM: 
THE STUDY OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM BETWEEN COUNTERCULTURE AND NEW COMPLEXITY

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I. Two Revolutions

The study of western esotericism finds itself in the middle of a process of academic professionalization and institutionalization. Before addressing some problems connected with this development, and as an introduction to them, I would like to draw a parallel which may seem surprising at first sight. It is well known that the turbulent period of the 1960s produced, among many other things, the so-called sexual revolution: a complex social phenomenon with wide-ranging effects, including the emergence of the academic study of sexuality and sex-related problems in the context of new disciplines such as gender studies. While this revolution has not led to the sexually liberated culture once predicted by its defenders, it did succeed in breaking the social taboo on sex as a subject of discussion, in the academy and in society as a whole. New disciplines such as gender studies have flourished since the 1960s, and there can be no doubt that any attempt to curtail or suppress scholarly discussion and research related to sexuality would nowadays be rejected by academics as an unacceptable infringement on intellectual freedom.

Parallel to the sexual revolution, the countercultural ferment of the 1960s produced a popular revolution of religious consciousness, with widespread interest in western esotericism as one of its major manifestations. As will be
seen, this development happened to coincide with the emergence of a new, thoroughly academic interest in the so-called "Hermetic Tradition" of the Renaissance. This domain of research had long been neglected by historians, due to its strong connections with "magic" and "the occult" in western culture: domains of human activity which were felt to be particularly unworthy of serious academic research. To some extent this attitude changed after the middle of the 1960s, but while the "Hermetic Tradition" did gain some recognition as a domain of academic investigation, scholarly attention remained limited essentially to early modern history and was dominated by research agendas concentrating on the relevance of hermeticism to the history of science and philosophy. The study of western esotericism generally — from the Renaissance to the present, and from a multidisciplinary perspective including the study of religion and other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences — remained curiously neglected.

The two revolutions of the 1960s and their related fields of research have more in common than one might think. Sex and "the occult" are both subjects invoking strong emotions and feelings of curiosity, and the secret attraction that they hold for many cannot be easily admitted in polite company. The social taboos on both domains have deep roots in dominant traditions of Christian theology; and the witchcraft persecutions of the 16th and 17th centuries furnish particularly clear examples of how closely "sex and the occult" could be linked in the Christian imagination. In the gradual process of secularization, for two reasons. Firstly, the former also includes a wide variety of new religious movements (NRMs) and trends with no particular connection to western esotericism (for example many Christian-evangelical NRMs, eastern missionary movements, and so on); secondly, the emergence of this popular "new religious consciousness" during the 1960s is essentially a social phenomenon, whereas contemporary western esotericism as one of its major subdomains is primarily defined and set apart not by the nature of its social manifestations but by the nature of its beliefs. It is only from the perspective of intellectual history that western esotericism in general, including its contemporary manifestations in the social context of the "new religious consciousness", can be demarcated as a specific domain in the history of religions — which obviously does not mean that social-science theories and approaches cannot or should not be applied to it! (see discussion in Hanegraaff, 'Empirical Method', esp. 112-113, 117-119)

A classic example is George Sarton, Introduction to the History of Science I, 19: 'The historian of science cannot devote much attention to the study of superstition and magic, that is, of unreason ... Human folly being at once unprogressive, unchangeable, and unlimited, its study is a hopeless undertaking'.

7 In this article I will not address the delicate problem of the definition and demarcation of "western esotericism" (about which see e.g. Hanegraaff, 'On the Construction'; cf. also the contribution by Carole Frosio in this issue of Aries), but refer simply to the short description of currents in the colophon of this journal (see under "Editorial Policy").

8 See e.g. the succinct discussion in Chambers, Sex and the Paranormal, 73-93. The connection has not remained limited to the imagination of outsiders: its was perhaps inevitable that not a few occultists in the wake of the Enlightenment would come to focus precisely on the combina-