
*Hic sunt dracones.* With these words Hanegraaff leads us on a journey to the terra incognita of Western esotericism, an increasingly popular field of research dedicated to a cluster of historically related traditions that emerged in the wake of the Renaissance humanist reception of Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and Gnostic currents of thought and practice. The author's stated objective is not to write a history of Western esotericism per se, but rather a history of its scholarly construction as the rejected Other of legitimate intellectual enterprise – a bold venture that ultimately ends in failure, although *Esotericism and the Academy* offers valuable new perspectives on a little-known territory and its inhabitants.

Hanegraaff sets the emergence of Western esotericism as a historiographical category within the broader historical context of debates concerning the 'Hellenization' of Christianity and their decisive influence upon the modern intellectual landscape. Thus the *prisca theologia* of Plethon, Ficino, and their heirs is exemplary of a Renaissance ‘ancient wisdom narrative’ with its origins in Platonising patristic apologetics; while this narrative established the referential corpus of what would become known as ‘Western esotericism’ (p. 73), the foundations for a properly historical study of the field only emerged via seventeenth-century Protestant anti-apologeticism (Thomasius, Colberg, Brucker) and its mission to expose the pagan Platonism that had ‘poisoned’ Christianity (pp. 150–151). In the wake of the Enlightenment, Western esotericism came to be conceptualised as a “waste-basket category” for disparate domains of knowledge rejected by disenchanted science (p. 254). Thus Hanegraaff’s book is a call to ‘correct our collective amnesia’ with an ‘anti-eclectic historiography’ that challenges the canon of modern intellectual culture (pp. 375, 377).

Yet this proposed act of remembering is hindered by the author’s more or less unwitting promotion of the marginalizing binary narratives he describes. Even if esotericism could accurately be portrayed as a mere counter-category of post-Enlightenment intellectual identity, Hanegraaff’s monolithic conception of that identity is nowhere more apparent than in his book’s opening pages, which launch into an essentializing depiction of ‘our’ mirror image (p. 3) that may well appear unintentionally esoterophobic to readers accustomed to engaging a plurality of scholarly subjectivities. Despite its debt to post-structuralist discourse analysis, at heart this work remains a Lovejovian history of ideas so unwaveringly internalist in orientation that agency is ascribed to historiographical categories: variously “the Enlightenment” (pp. 141, 278, 373), “modern chemistry” (p. 212), “Protestantism” (p. 221), and “modernity” (p. 374) are said to “define their own identities” through the production of alterity. In this manner the history and historiography of esotericism are conflated and presented as free-floating superstructures, torn from their
moorings in socio-economic tumult, cultural interchange, and the experiential
wellsprings of doctrine in biography and religious praxis.

The almost complete absence of wars, expulsions, financial crises, revolutions
(and most glaringly the Reformation itself) from his account lends Hanegraaff a
blank slate on which to Whiggishly depict the rise and fall of disembodied dis-
courses as a triumphant march towards the emergence of his own methodological
paradigm. For *Esotericism and the Academy* is essentially an extended polemic
against the phenomenology of religion, which dominated the academic study of
religion in the Netherlands until the ‘anthropological turn’ that remains
Hanegraaff’s chief inspiration. Evans-Pritchard and Geertz even make a brief
appearance (pp. 75–76) to explain the persistence of a belief in the priscas theologias
among our continent’s inhabitants, despite the emergence of a historical-critical
methodology that was “simply superior” (p. 127): empirical science is of no avail
when it comes to cherished ‘sentiments and values,’ or to the ‘metaphysical pathos’
(Lovejoy) adhering to supposedly immutable truths.

Much as depictions of colonial fauna bear the unmistakeable traces of an alien
imaginary, so the denizens of Hanegraaff’s continent too often appear as curious
hybrid creatures in which the author’s contemporary Dutch sensibilities threaten
to overwhelm unique historical forms just as surely as the ‘one-size-fits-all’ archet-
typal template of the sui generis approach to religion. Thus Ficino is said (contra
Hankins) to have conceived of the era of the prisci theologias in terms of a “timeless
metaphysics” (p. 50), while the “mundane contingencies of history” were nothing
more to him than the external manifestation of “meaningful synchronicities”
(p. 43). If Ficino is transformed into Jung, Eliade lends his countenance to the first
‘religionist’ pseudo-historiographer, Gottfried Arnold, who could only respond to
the ascent of the superior historical-critical paradigm with a feeble discursive
‘strategy’ portraying true Christian religion as an irreducible experience of ‘the
sacred’ (p. 149). Such projections of a very recognisably contemporary worldview
rival Arnold’s *Impartial History of the Church and Heretics* as an exercise in partisan
history writing – a problem only compounded by Hanegraaff’s repeated and
strongly normative insistence that his position is “non-ideological” (pp. 150, 218,
313, 377), which serves to veil a transcendental ahistorical subject manifestly
derived from the Calvinist imago Dei.

An account of the intellectual construction of ‘Western esotericism’ as a histo-
riographical category can only be misconceived if it fails to consider the history
of European religious esotericism in its narrower etymological sense, i.e. restricted
religious doctrines and practices typically dealing with the production of radically
altered states of consciousness. These are less visible to the contemporary historian
due to their transmission in oral or manuscript form; alas, in *Esotericism and
the Academy* they are altogether invisible. As the thrust of the Protestant ‘anti-
apologetic’ polemic was directed less towards the paganism in Roman Catholicism
(p. 147) than towards the esoteric inspirationism within Protestantism, some