
We are vaguely aware of its existence in our culture and our history. But we would not be able to define what it is, and are at loss about what to call it. It has many names, but none of them seems to have a clear and straightforward meaning, and each carries associations that are somehow questionable or confusing. And yet, all these names — “esotericism,” “hermeticism,” “the occult,” “magic,” “mysticism,” “superstition,” “the irrational,” and so on — refer to something that unquestionably seems to exist. (p. 1)

So starts Wouter Hanegraaff’s Esotericism and the Academy. The aim of the book is not to provide a history of esotericism as an object, but rather a history of how certain phenomena, in historically specific processes, have come to be associated with this vague and confusing “something.” It is a study of phenomena being projected as “the Other,” in light of which understandings of self as enlightened, orthodox, progressive, and so on, have been constructed. The book consists of four chapters, thematically divided into four modes of historiography: the search for ancient wisdom, polemical accounts of “pure” Christianity being tainted by pagan influences, the rejection of certain subject areas as unworthy of study, and the uncovering of historical developments and relations where the existence and significance of this rejected knowledge is acknowledged. In providing overarching perspectives, the book is a welcome addition in a field where many studies focus on isolated expressions or key influential actors, and thus the work is of significance for scholarship on cultural and religious history in a broader sense.

The first chapter is primarily focused on the Italian Renaissance, regarded by many scholars in the field as the birthplace of esotericism. For Hanegraaff, the particularity of the Renaissance was the emergence of a new intellectual interest in the history of human thought and the reconsideration of the relation between human rationality and divine revelation. In this atmosphere, attempts were made to write a “history of truth” where the religiously authentic existed in the ancient. Two primary approaches were central, prisca theologia (“ancient theology”) and philosophia perennis (“eternal philosophy”). While often conflated, these approaches in fact build on very different presuppositions. The former describes higher wisdom as having resided with the ancient sages and lost over time, suggesting that existing ideas and institutions needed to be reformed in order to align them with the Truth. The latter, in contrast, proposes a continuity in higher wisdom, with existing institutions representing
perfection and thus being in no need of reform. The notion of “Platonic Orientalism,” operating on the idea that ancient wisdom originated (and sometimes resided with) “pagans” in the East, surfaces as central. For Hanegraaff, the Byzantine philosopher “Plethon” (George Gemistos, 1355/60–1452), as a “concealed neopagan” and “living embodiment of Platonic Orientalism” (p. 30), had such an impact in Renaissance Italy that he was even dubbed a “second Plato.” According to Hanegraaff, it was the idea of Plethon as an “Eastern Sage” rather than his teachings that inspired Renaissance intellectuals.

While many were fascinated by pre-Christian philosophy, others were deeply concerned by the corruption of Christianity by “pagan philosophy.” They thus engaged in writing accounts of philosophy/paganism depicted as fallible human invention and thus inferior to true religion that was eternal and beyond history. In this atmosphere, Greek Orthodoxy and classic esoteric philosophies and practices such as astrology, magic, and kabbalah, were framed as being incompatible with Catholicism — the former being considered Platonic and the latter Aristotelian — and during the Protestant Reformation both Catholics and Protestants accused one another of dealing with “paganism.” In the Catholic camp, Ehregott Daniel Colberg (1659–1698) attempted to purge foreign influences by listing them in his Platonisch-Hermetisches Christendom, thus producing the first grouping together of many of the philosophies and practices nowadays studied under the rubric of Western esotericism. Opposing views were presented by the radical Pietist Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714) who proposed a religionist alternative focused on the spirit of humble faith and practical piety as the mark of being a true Christian. For Arnold, historical relations between paganism and Christianity were uninteresting and one could explore philosophy (“Athens”) as long as one’s heart was in “Jerusalem.” In the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, attempts were made to distinguish “false and bogus” irrational philosophy from its rational counterpart. The same was done with “rational” (i.e., Christian) and “superstitious” and “irrational” (i.e., pagan) religion. Platonic Orientalists were no longer deemed to be dangerous or heretic, but simply foolish. “Western esoteric” philosophies disappeared from textbooks in the history of philosophy because they were not considered serious enough subjects, and a literary genre dealing with “histories of stupidity” emerged. Consequently, ancient wisdom-narratives stopped being valid alternatives in mainstream intellectual discourse.

With chapter three we move into the eighteenth century, deeper into the Enlightenment, during a time when Christianity was losing its interpretative hegemony. In a continued rejection of the mystical in favor of science and natural philosophy, terms such as “the supernatural” and “magic” shifted from their earlier meanings and came to signify the foolish and unscientific, the