

Final Draft of Book Review “Versluis, Arthur (2007) Magic and Mysticism; An introduction to Western Esotericism. Rowan and Littlefield.” *The Pomegranate: International Journal of Pagan Studies*, Vol 16/2

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Professor Arthur Versluis’ introduction to Western Esotericism provides a clear account of the historical antecedents of contemporary Western Esotericism, interweaving strands and transmission, and scholars who have illuminated this fascinating field. He engagingly explores millennia of history, theology and philosophy, magic, mysticism, esotericism, and the ground between, in a remarkably comprehensive guide. It is simply structured, easily readable and will appeal to a wide audience. Versluis’ discussions extend into many key questions about the academic study of esotericism, making the book a useful addition to any university library.

The book is split into 9 chapters. The first introductory chapter introduces esotericism, mysticism and magic, dynamic modes of the esoteric, and esotericism as a field of academic enquiry.

Chapter Two discusses Antiquity. This looks at the ancient mystery traditions, ancient Greek and Roman magical traditions, Plato and Platonism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Jewish mysticism and Christian gnosis, exemplified by Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Dionysius the Areopagite, as well as wider influences such as Manichaeism. Versluis discusses Dionysius the Areopagite’s distinction between the “via positiva”, or path of symbols and the “via negativa”, or path of absolute transcendence or negation. This is a distinction he returns to throughout the book as a model for understanding different modes of esoteric discourse and practice.

Chapter Three focuses on late antiquity, discussing the religious currents of Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism, and Christian gnosis. Versluis argues that it is only in the twentieth century that scholars began to develop a clear image of the period and its esoteric currents, since Christian history was written by church “hierarchyologists”, church fathers invested in orthodoxy rather than mythological and Gnostic writings. He sees this as a critical point that precipitated centuries of negative bias against initiatory esoteric spirituality, that was driven underground, only to endure and flourish via Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, esoteric traditions of alchemy, astrology, and magic as a “subterranean continuation of esotericism” (Versluis 2007:24).

The book condenses vast amounts of material. Chapter Four encompasses the Medieval Era in which Versluis discusses the necessity of considering the foundations of medieval Western Christianity in order to understand the two primary medieval traditions of magic and mysticism, and describes the importance of theurgy as magical practice within Neo-Platonism in late antiquity. He brings alive the esotericism of the eras he describes with a vivacity that will highlight their relevance today for anyone looking at the contemporary Esotericism i.e. “Iamblichus and the other Neo-Platonism theurgists differentiated their theurgic practices from sorcery precisely because whereas a sorcerer seeks to control supernatural powers, the theurgist seeks to purify himself and unite with divine powers. According to this distinction

the coercer compels, while the religious magician or theurgist submits to divine power and seeks to channel it” (Versluis 2007:45). This is a working distinction I have heard many times within contemporary Paganism as a heuristic device for differentiating the magical arts of the witch and the magician, and such simply put statements work well to highlight continuities in contemporary practitioners’ oral traditions from historical discussion of ancient belief systems. He continues with discussions of Iamblichus, Augustine of Hippo etc, making their work and history highly accessible, yet never straying from the academic basis of the book, and at this point introduces Peter Brown and Ankerloo and Clark as further references.

Here Versluis also discusses the complex relationship between magic and mysticism in Jewish Kabbalah, citing Moshe Idel as a scholar of interest. He describes the incorporation of Neo-Platonic daimons into Christianity, along with the interweaving of Jewish sources such as the Book of Enoch, and correspondences between non canonical sources and the Old Testament, i.e. Leviticus discussion of Azazel. There is further discussion of the Via Positiva and Negativa, and the role of Nature in subsequent Western esoteric traditions, particularly referring to John Scotus Eriugena. The chapter ends with a discussion of medieval folk magic and witchcraft, witch persecutions, Kabbalah and magico-mysticism, scholastic magic, medieval heresies, and gnosis and magic in medieval Judaism.

Chapter Five focuses on the Renaissance, Neo-Platonism and scholarly magic. With many lesser known figures discussed as well as Ficino, Pletho, Del la Mirandola, and Lazzarelli. Versluis shows how this scholarly magic was “the heart of the renaissance itself” (Versluis 2007:75), during which translation and interpretation of ancient theologies had a profound impact on the humanities via a Universalist syncretism that came to characterize modernity.

In Chapter Six Versluis moves on to Early Modern esoteric currents, including Alchemy, Rosicrucianism, Pansophy, Freemasonry, Astrology, Weigel and Pietism, and Christian Theosophy. He discusses how each era reflects its own culture in its efforts to understand the cosmos, from the creative imagination of Paracelsus, through the cartography of the eighteenth century to today’s scholars, suggesting that “each interpretation could be seen as offering a different window into some aspect of these mysterious works”(Versluis 2007: 86).

Chapter Seven explores Modern Christian Theosophy, introducing German, English, and French, Russian and American Theosophy and their scholars. This leads neatly onto Chapter Eight, Western Esotericism Today, which discusses major western magical figures, currents and influences, then leads via the Golden Dawn et al to one sentence on Witchcraft and Wicca, followed by subsections on American Folk Magic, Chaos Magic, Syncretism, Universalism, New Age Universalism, Literary Esotericism, New Religious Movements, and independent spirits. This is the only chapter to disappoint, by avoiding discussion of successful esoteric continuities such as initiatory Wicca or the contemporary OTO, which have greater consistency, numbers of adherents, and steadfast associations with esoteric thought and practice than the groups he briefly mentions. However, as this book is an excellent introduction to millennia of Western Esotericism, this is a small and slightly picky complaint.

I recommend this book to all scholars of Paganism, particularly if they identify with the integrative social scientific approach, which incorporates contemporary social scientific theory and methodology into the study of esotericism. Those who are interested in the discussion of academic theories and methods in the study Esotericism should find Versluis approach of interest:

“An implicit antiesotericism sometimes appears in a rigorously externalist approach that it apparently studies. In the sphere of the esoteric, this is potentially far more disastrous than a “religionist” approach that at least seeks to understand an esoteric tradition, figure, or group on its own terms. Externalism is visible in a variety of reductionism, including deconstructionism. As Moshe Idel puts it, whereas “traditional radicalism in Kabbalah was ready to deconstruct the text in order to find God by a more direct experience,” “modern deconstruction has first to kill God or transcendental meaning in order to devise the text”. Magic and Mysticism as subjects of academic study are still marginalized, in part because of the long-standing antiesoteric bias in the West, and by the related desire to turn both subjects into objects of rationalist discourse and marginalization... Esotericism borders on consciousness studies... as the study of esotericism continues, it will have to develop more sophisticated phenomenological ways of approaching and understanding what is esoteric...and of the potential benefits of remaining open rather than closed or self consciously external, let alone hostile to one’s subjects”(Versluis 2007: 5-6).

Those who do not agree with Versluis may agree with Wouter Hanegraaf’s critique of Versluis, which is worth reading as he is a leading scholar of Esotericism, and warmly acknowledged by Versluis, while proposing an opposing stance. He highlights areas where the interweaving continuum described by Versluis could be clearer and better delineated, and discusses and compares it to other introductions. One can see that Versluis and Hanegraaf are both passionate about Western Esotericism and its inherent influence on Western culture, and provide between them clearly demarcated parameters for developing research on Western Esotericism.

Hanegraaf suggests that this book is indicative of a redundant form of religionist Esotericism, but it may rather be part of a wider reflexive transdisciplinary form of scholarship strongly influenced by modern social sciences. Certainly it is very compatible with recent papers from Amy Hale (2013), Michael York (2013), and Stanislas Panin (2015). Therefore Versluis short introduction is worth buying as an example of a radically different approach to Western Esotericism from that of Hanegraaf et al, which leans towards integrating the study of esotericism with consciousness studies. As well providing a wealth of information in 178 pages *Magic and Mysticism, An Introduction to Western Esotericism* invites healthy discussion about the way we study, engage with, and write about “Western” Esotericism(s).

Hale A (2013) Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs Esoteric Studies. *The Pomegranate* 15.1-2

Hanegraaf W J (2013) Textbooks and Introductions to Esotericism. *Religion* , 2013 Vol. 43, No. 2, 178

Panin S (2015) Discussions on Pagan Theology in the Academia and in the Pagan Community *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol 6 No 3 S1

York M. (2013). An Intersubjective Critique of A Critique of Pagan Scholarship. *Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*, 15(1-2): 136-150.

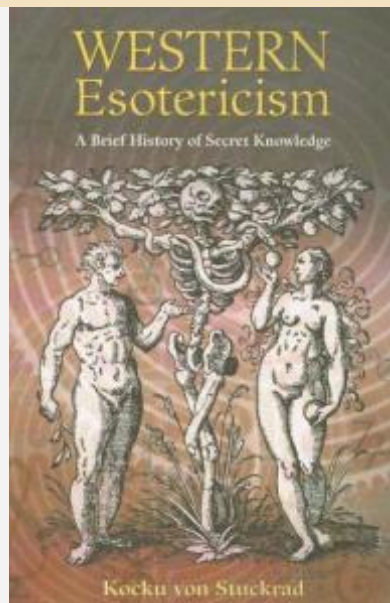
Towards Esotericism 3.0 – W. J. Hanegraaff reviews seven esotericism textbooks

WH - More than just a review of introductions, the article engages critically with the theoretical and methodological challenges of the field, and takes a clear stand on where one should go from here. The result is an article that analyses the present situation of esotericism research, provides an overview of strengths and weaknesses in the basic literature that newcomers are likely to encounter, and offers a pronounced and programmatic statement for future researchers and teachers.

Before I mention the books being reviewed, I should point out an important historical premise of the article. It is well known that esotericism as a field of academic research is, in its present incarnation, relatively young, and that it also carries with it a problematic heritage. Problematic first and foremost from a methodological point of view: among the early pioneers we count figures such as Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade, and (the early) Antoine Faivre, who were generally working within a framework that has been described as “religionist”. Despite styling themselves historians, they were looking for the eternal truths, the transcendent realities, the spiritual enlightenment that they assumed had to be at the core of religions, hidden beneath their “external” and contingent vesture. They were, in a sense, creating esoteric discourse rather than analysing it; engaged in esoteric hermeneutics rather than historical-critical scholarship *sensu stricto*. They did so, moreover, under the influence of esoteric Traditionalism and interpretations of Jungian psychology, and typically saw their form of scholarship as a reaction to “reductionism”, “materialism”, or even “modernity” as such.

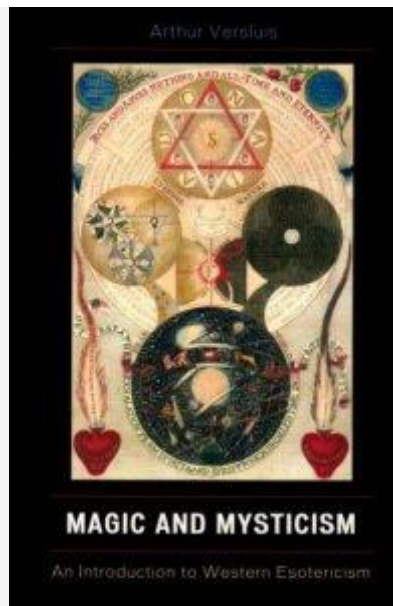
Making an analogy to development of software technologies, Hanegraaff refers to this phase in esotericism research as “Esotericism 1.0”. It turned out to be not a very good operative system, however, and it underwent a serious upgrade about the year 1992. This is when Faivre published the first edition of his textbook, *L'ésoterisme*, marking a significant break from his own earlier style of research. Faivre underwent an “empirical turn”, more fully embracing the strictures of historical-critical methods while ditching religionist assumptions as the guiding principle for studying “esoteric currents”. What followed was the establishment of a new paradigm, “Esotericism 2.0”. Faivre’s new perspective became dominant, particularly his famous definition of esotericism as a “form of thought” identified by four intrinsic and two non-intrinsic characteristics (correspondences, living nature,

mediation, transmutations + concordances, transmission). Arguably, it remains dominant today – sometimes even implicitly in scholars who claim to distance themselves from Faivre.



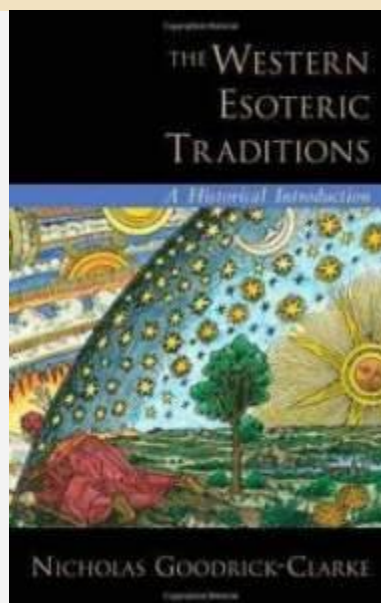
Von Stuckrad's introduction was important for challenging the dominance of Faivre, but has flaws of its own.

The textbooks and introductions to Western esotericism reviewed by Hanegraaff all belong to a post-Faivrean “esotericism 2.0” framework – at least nominally. It begins with Kocku von Stuckrad's *Was ist Esoterik?* (2004) and its English translation, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (2005), a book that explicitly aims to replace the Faivrean framework. Arguably, however, von Stuckrad did not properly succeed in doing so until a few years later, with the publication of his *Locations of Knowledge* (2010), where the implications of the **discursive approach to esotericism** that he suggests, embedded in a broader *Europäische Religionsgeschichte*, are taken to their full conclusion. A conclusion that implies, among other things, that there can be no real “history of” esotericism (seeing as “it” is construed as a conceptual tool for discourse analysis and not a signifier for any particular subject matter), and hence that writing an introduction to “it” is pretty much a quixotic task. Hanegraaff argues that there is an internal tension in von Stuckrad's *Western Esotericism*, stemming precisely from the incompatibility of his methodological stance and the chosen task. The effect is that much of the work that is *actually* done in the book is still implicitly modelled on Faivre's delimitation and description of the field, even though it is clear that the author ideally wants to take the field somewhere else (and eventually did).



Versluis does not hide the “religionist” underpinnings of his work.

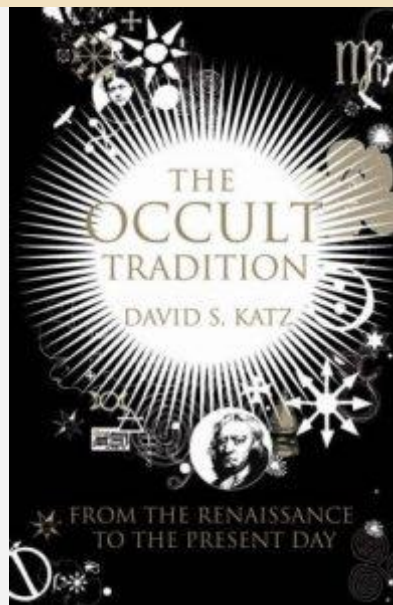
Other influential introductory works that are reviewed include Arthur Versluis’ *Magic and Mysticism* (2007), Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s *The Western Esoteric Traditions* (2008), and the recent translation of the fourth edition of Antoine Faivre’s introduction, *Western Esotericism* (2010; French edition 2007). Unfortunately, Hanegraaff argues, all these alternatives suffer from serious weaknesses. Versluis’ book is dependent on old religionist assumptions about eternal, immaterial truths, and is so to speak stuck in “esotericism 1.0”. Faivre’s book is solid enough, but way too scanty, and suffers from a poor translation from the French.



Goodrick-Clarke’s book may be the best we’ve got by way of introduction to the material, but has serious problems when it comes to methodology.

Goodrick-Clarke's book is probably the "lesser evil" – good prose, fairly representative for most periods, and fairly accurate in terms of factual details. It does, however, suffer from theoretical and methodological problems similar to Versluis': Goodrick-Clarke conceives of esotericism as reflecting "an autonomous and essential aspect of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos", and urges that one cannot understand "it" properly unless one is willing to adopt "a hermeneutic interpretation of spirit and spirituality as an independent ontological reality". These are surprisingly candid confessions of a religionist methodology.

One also has to suspect that it is due to following these principles that the author completely ignores writing about controversial topics where esotericism is linked, for example, to radical right-wing politics (a subject on which Goodrick-Clarke was an undisputed expert, but surprisingly left out from his introductory work), or where fraudulent techniques have been used to present esoteric "higher truths" (such as in the case of Blavatsky and early Theosophy). The problems arising in Goodrick-Clarke's introduction is not so much with the material that is presented, but rather the subjects that are left out, the questions that are never asked.



Nice cover, but stay away from the content if you want solid knowledge about esotericism.

In addition to these books, which are the ones most likely to appear on an undergraduate course today, Hanegraaff also takes the opportunity to review a few books that are more marginal to the field, but still interesting because of what they reveal about its current situation in the broader academic and public landscape. Thus we can read about Ulrike Peters' short and popularising *Esoterik* (2005), which mostly equates "esotericism" with modern and contemporary "alternative spirituality". We read a (no doubt deservedly) shattering review of David Katz' *The Occult Tradition* (2005), a book that, in addition to

getting so much factually wrong also produces some baffling assumptions about “the occult” and “religion” alike. We learn that “the occult” is merely belief in “the supernatural”, and that such belief must be strictly separated from “religion”, for example. But then again, we are also told that Newton’s worldview was “teeming with esoteric secrets and occult mysteries”, and that Kant was an occult philosopher, so the author clearly has a rather “alternative” way of categorising the world in the first place. Hanegraaff also presents a complete demolition of another German work, Hartmut Zinser’s *Esoterik* (2009). Hanegraaff appears to find this book rather insulting, seeing that it is written by a professor of religious studies, but with a complete refusal to engage with actual scholarship in the field he has taken it upon himself to introduce. The book, as Hanegraaff observes, is rather an exercise in polemicising against “Aberglaube” (superstition) and irrationality – following no doubt the intuitive reflexes canonized in Germany by the Frankfurter Schule. It is curious that an established academic can still get away with this when the subject matter is esotericism. If Zinser had written an introduction to the study of Islam using **Oriana Fallaci** and **Gisèle Littman** as his main sources, the result would have been comparably disastrous from a scholarly point of view – but it would also no doubt have caused a flurry of reactions from his colleagues.

What, then, is the conclusion of this extensive review article? Obviously, it must be rather disappointing. There is (still) no single satisfactory introduction to esotericism out there. The body of literature that exists points in all directions, has no unity in terms of definitions, and authors do not share even the most basic assumptions about how to go about studying esotericism in the first place. This verdict is somewhat similar to what Markus Davidsen recently found in his review article of a presumably state-of-the-art publication in the related field of “pagan studies” (see his article “**What is wrong with Pagan Studies**”, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 24). In addition, it is apparently still possible for anyone who chooses to do so to write utter nonsense about the field and have it published by an academic publisher.

Those are all problems to be taken seriously. And they are the reason why Hanegraaff calls for another upgrade of the operative system: we need an “esotericism 3.0”. What will it look like? That is not certain, but a few things can nevertheless be said. We need to finally patch the religionism bug, and embrace (fully and completely) more robust methodologies that stand up to scrutiny from colleagues in neighbouring fields (this, I should add, is *my* view, and not explicitly put this way in Hanegraaff’s article). Secondly, we should not be content with isolating “esotericism” as an island of its own, where “weird” topics can be pursued, or “spiritual secrets” sought for their own sake. Bridges must be built to neighbouring fields, we must show how the subject matter of esotericism, as well as the theoretical debates we easily

get into in this field, are of importance to such areas as religion, literature, art, history of science, history of philosophy, of politics and of ideology, even to economic history and certainly to social history. Unless esotericism 3.0 proves its relevance to the broader academic community, the field is destined to stagnate, and possibly perish prematurely. If it succeeds, however, future introductory textbooks to esotericism will be read in a broad spectrum of disciplines, as an essential part of our general understanding of Western intellectual and religious history. Hanegraaff's review shows that the path there is still long, but hopefully the call for action can at least push us in the right direction.

Reference: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism". *Religion* DOI:10.1080/0048721X.2012.733245.



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This article reviews the presently available supply of textbooks and introductions to the new academic field of study known as 'Western esotericism'. By analogy with computer software, the author refers to the early 'religionist' phase of research in this domain as 'Western esotericism 1.0'. He argues that Antoine Faivre's small French textbook *L'ésotérisme* (1992) marked the beginning of a more satisfactory upgrade that might be referred to as 'Western esotericism 2.0' and remains dominant in teaching and research today. A critical review of textbooks and introductions representative of this second phase of academic professionalisation reveals a number of structural problems and weaknesses ('bugs and design faults') that need to be corrected in order for the field to complete its adolescence and reach academic maturity. To accommodate the needs and new perspectives of the upcoming generation of scholars in this field, it is therefore time for an upgrade to 'Western esotericism 3.0'.