

CHAPTER 2

CONSTRUCTING ESOTERICISMS

SOCIOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

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[N]ovelty is no less novel for being able to dress up easily as antiquity.¹

“Esotericism” is often linked with “tradition”. References to “hidden” or “perennial” traditions abound on the emic level, and often enough esotericism has itself been conceived of as constituting a “tradition” traceable through history. These two general tendencies hide a web of interrelated questions, which can be probed from the perspectives of sociology and history. In the present chapter, we chart some of the most important of these, aiming at a comprehensive overview of the problems surrounding the notion of “tradition” in the field of esotericism and pointing at ways to deal with them.

Our approach is therefore synthetic, and ploughs through several layers of discussions. First, we discuss briefly the vague and problematic uses to which the term tradition is often put. This brings us to a discussion of attempts to operationalize the term in the context of sociology. We generally find that a lack of historical awareness is detrimental to sociological uses of “tradition”/“traditional”, although the more nuanced notion of “detraditionalization” and attendant processes does have some promise. After pointing out shortcomings of these conceptualizations of tradition, we turn to a critical constructivist approach emphasizing the *inventedness* of traditions. Drawing on the approach pioneered by Eric Hobsbawm,² and the applications of similar approaches to religion by Olav Hammer and James Lewis,³ and to esotericism by Hammer,⁴ we recognize its strong critical potential and call for more systematic scrutiny of the social, material, contextual and situated background

1. Hobsbawm, “Introduction”, 5

2. Hobsbawm & Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

3. Lewis & Hammer, *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*.

4. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*.

of the construction and claim of tradition in esoteric discourses. Moving then from “etic” discussions of the application of concepts to the “emic” level, we review Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s recent work⁵ on the formation of “esotericism” from changing discourses on knowledge and truth in European history, and draw out some implications for the study of tradition. As Hanegraaff also argues, the thesis has consequences for assessing the way scholars have construed their object of study in the twentieth century. We go on to discuss how the notion of an “esoteric/occult tradition” may in fact be seen as the result of these prior constructions of “ancient wisdom narratives” and their uses (*pro* and *contra*), sometimes with the overtones of perennialism still intact. These discussions culminate in a case study which emphasizes the *co-production* of tradition by scholars and practitioners: the construction of “shamanism” as a category by nationalistically driven folklorists, “religionist” historians of religions and anthropologists “gone native”.

This is, however, not the only way in which scholars take part in construction. Focusing also on those who have had no intention or desire to found new religious trends, and even been explicitly adverse to the idea, we argue that the very existence of our field and our strategic uses of terms such as “esotericism” in particular have facilitated, through grateful reception among practitioners, a process by which “esotericism” is *becoming an object* in a sense which it arguably was not before. Finally, we round off our series of discussions by taking a final look at the role of fiction and popular culture in constructing tradition. Together, these latter points (the role of scholarship, fiction, and popular culture) mark out particularly important areas for the construction of traditions in contemporary esotericism.

THE MANY FACES OF TRADITION

The term “tradition” has been associated with a large number of different meanings in both common speech and specialist literature. A plurality of conceptualizations of tradition exists in scholarly circles, often bound up in specific disciplinary concerns and preferences. Starting with conceptualizations closest to general dictionary understandings, “tradition” can be described as:

[A]nything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present ... [including] all that a society of a given time possesses and which already existed when its present possessors came upon it and which is not solely the product of physical processes in the external world or exclusively the result of ecological and physiological necessity.⁶

5. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

6. Shils, *Tradition*, 12.

The standard definition thus follows closely on the etymological origin of the term, with the Latin verb *tradere* meaning “to hand over” or “deliver”.⁷ This general understanding, however, seems hardly analytically useful.

Another common understanding, relating specifically to the field of religion, is when “tradition” functions simply as a synonym for a particular religion.⁸ For example, “Islamic tradition” may simply denote the religion Islam. This use is doubly problematic, as it tends to homogenize its subject, while at the same time making a more analytically focused use of the term more difficult. Sometimes the homogenizing aspect of this use of the term is even more drastic, as when “Western religious tradition” is used to refer solely to Christianity.⁹

A third understanding, derived from the discipline of anthropology and still in use in some historiographic research informed by the discipline, is the use of “traditional religion” to denote religious expressions which are (seemingly) unaffected by (Western) modernizing influences. The goal is then to examine the particularities of pre-modern social, cultural, and religious organization, often with a focus on the role played by oral transmission of knowledge and culture in non-literate societies. Sometimes the findings are then used to gain insight into what pre-modern European society might have looked like, or even getting to the “origin” of human religiosity (a kind of primitivism which connects to scholarship on “shamanism”, which will be discussed in more detail later on). In part, this attempt to discard the more pejorative terms “primitive religion” and “illiterate societies” is admirable, but it is still problematic. The projection of “traditional societies”, whether they be pre-modern Western or current non-Western ones, tends to say more about the scholar’s perceptions of self and the society he/she comes from than accurately describing the society/religion under actual investigation. Thus, the projection of “traditional religion” is problematic both in potentially homogenizing its subject (i.e. presenting “traditional religion” as a more or less uniform category) and in being essentially bound up in colonialist discourse whereby the self is created by the construction of the Other (i.e. “modern” versus “traditional”).

The sociology of religion has inherited much from the early anthropological and historical perspectives on tradition, although lacking the somewhat more complex historical model of “eras”. Instead, we often deal with modernity and “that which comes before”, resulting in a curiously homogenous-looking past.¹⁰ This is a natural result of sociology’s preoccupation with the

7. Valliere, “Tradition”, 9267.

8. *Ibid.*, 9268.

9. See e.g. Richard H. Roberts, “Body”, 216–21.

10. For the simplification of “the past” in sociological theory, and in particular secularization theory, see Granholm’s article in the present volume. A good example is Steve Bruce’s assessment that most social scientists agree that “modern societies are less religious than traditional ones” (Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World*, 52).

present (and sometimes future), but is very problematic in containing simplified accounts of the past, which are often based on little or no empirical evidence. This, of course, is problematic for sociological accounts of modern social change as well: how are we to determine what is changing and how it is changing, if our view of the past is flawed? Consequently, it is not strange that “the notion of tradition has received little systematic attention in the literature of sociology and social theory”.¹¹

DETRADITIONALIZATION, DISEMBEDDING AND RE-EMBEDDING: A FURTHER NOTE ON SOCIOLOGY

While sociology is often hampered by a degree of historical naivety, some of its perspectives can be put to good use when informed by historical awareness. In the present discussion of operationalizing concepts of tradition, this applies to the concept of *detraditionalization*, which, as most sociological terms, refers to a process of societal transformation – in this case primarily changes in perceptions of authority. One thing that the concept offers is an analytic distinction between “religion” and “tradition”. Thus Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead distinguish between “*strongly traditionalized* religion”, which “involves faith in knowledge and wisdom taken to be transmitted from the transcendent and authoritative past”, and “*strongly detraditionalized* religion”, which “turns elsewhere for authority”.¹² While commonly linked to secularization, detraditionalization is distinct in that it “has to do with the transformation not the disappearance of religion”.¹³ It also does not, in contrast to many secularization theories, imply a necessary decrease in the impact of religion.

In Heelas’s working definition, detraditionalization “involves a shift of authority: from ‘without’ to ‘within’”, as well as “the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural orders of things”.¹⁴ This means that authority, when “detraditionalized”, is rooted in individual experience and subjective validations, rather than in external standards of shared cultural custom. A problem is that Heelas’s work is informed by a simplified distinction between “religions of difference”, “religions of humanity” and “spiritualities of life”,¹⁵ which demonstrates obvious value judgments. Heelas clearly regards “spiritualities of life” more favourably, and as forms of religiosity which suit late modern life better, whereas “religions of difference” are deemed conservative, dogmatic, and repressive.

11. Thompson, “Tradition and Self in a Mediated World”, 91.

12. Woodhead & Heelas, “Detraditionalization”, 342.

13. *Ibid.*, 346.

14. Heelas, “Introduction”, 2.

15. See Heelas, “The Spiritual Revolution” for a discussion of these categories, and Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life* for a more thorough discussion of the latter.

In Heelas's view, detraditionalization is dependent on the possibility of reflection on one's situation, and is accentuated by multiculturalism and the pluralization and fragmentation of worldviews and values it brings, as well as the commodification of culture and religion in "late capitalism".¹⁶ The multitude of possible outlooks serves to diminish the power of exclusivist and hegemonic claims to truth. This is also facilitated by previously connected spheres of life becoming increasingly differentiated and relegated to their own separate domains – with divisions between home and work, private and public, high and mass culture, as well as concepts of race and national identity, becoming influential social realities.

A pair of terms that could be linked to sociological discussions of detraditionalization, and which may even be more useful, is "disembedding" and "re-embedding". These terms refer to linked processes whereby certain cultural or religious elements are separated from their various contexts (disembedded) and situated in new ones (re-embedded). Here historiographic awareness, including from the study of the esoteric, can greatly augment sociological perspectives. Sociologists tend to regard the processes of dis- and re-embedding as in some way characteristic of modernity.¹⁷ While this is true in the sense that the processes certainly seem to have accentuated in modernity, a look at esoteric actors demonstrates that this practice has been commonplace among so-called esotericists for a very long time, and in fact seems to be a driving dynamic in internal cultural innovation – from the translation and incorporation of the Hermetic texts, and the development of a Christian Kabbalah, to the esoteric reception of yoga and Buddhist doctrine in the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century. Even more broadly, processes of dis- and re-embedding seem to be intrinsically linked to concepts of "syncretism".¹⁸

The concept of detraditionalization, particularly when coupled with the notions of dis- and re-embedding, can thus be used to make sense of the changing role of the esoteric today, and to align the study of the esoteric to sociological approaches to religious and cultural transformation. If detraditionalization is taken to imply a shift from "external" to "internal" modes of authority, and late modernity is characterized by this process, then the *popularization* of the esoteric¹⁹ is made more understandable. With a focus on individual experience often paramount, esoteric discourse would furthermore seem to be a perfect fit with late modern individualistic sensibilities. If accentuation of the willingness to "pick and choose" elements from many different religions, as explicated by the processes of dis- and re-embedding, is part of

16. Heelas, "Introduction", 4–5.

17. See e.g. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 21–9.

18. For discussions of these concepts drawing on the context of esotericism, see Asprem, "Kabbalah Recreata"; cf. Petersen, "We Demand Bedrock Knowledge", 102–9.

19. See Chapter 6 of the present volume.

this process of detraditionalization, then the inherent eclecticism of esotericism is even better fit for the ethos of the late modern citizen. Furthermore, this eclectic function was in place long before “modernity” (as understood in a sociological sense). In fact, this may amount to a criticism of Heelas’s understanding of detraditionalization, as the de facto disembedding of cultural data and their re-embedding in new contexts has very often been intrinsically linked with specific esoteric claims to *tradition* – particularly forms of perennialism, as we discuss at length later in this chapter.

While we should thus keep the above discussion in mind, the problems mentioned suggest to us that quite different analytical perspectives on “tradition” are needed for our concerns. We suggest that a fruitful way to go is to follow a critical constructivist course, focusing on the ways in which “traditions” are constructed in specific historical, social, and cultural contexts, and the ways they are claimed by situated spokespersons, rather than trying to use the term as an unproblematic analytic term to be employed by the scholar for picking out features or developmental traits in a given “religion” or “culture”.

INVENTING TRADITION

In a seminal collection of essays from 1983, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger launched a serious scholarly interest in the *inventedness* of tradition, and its social, historical, and cultural significance.²⁰ The authors noticed how a large number of “traditions” in modern society (especially connected with state, government and national culture and identity, which appeared to present an aura of long-standing continuity with the past) were, upon further scrutiny, in fact constructed in the relatively recent past. The invention of traditions was seen to be intrinsically linked to nationalist projects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and as responses to the great upheavals of political and social revolutions, with Hobsbawm even pointing to a veritable “mass-production of tradition” in the period between 1870 and 1914.²¹

The notion of “invented tradition” was originally defined by Hobsbawm as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”²² The focus was on the grand scale of society and on large, often “secular” institutions. Nevertheless, as a general approach to researching traditions a focus on invention has significant value for the study of religion, as

20. Hobsbawm & Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

21. Hobsbawm, “Mass-Producing Traditions”.

22. Hobsbawm, “Introduction”, 2.

well as the study of esotericism.²³ As Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis note, every single known religious system cultivates invented traditions of one sort or another. Often links are created to mythic or romanticized pasts; in addition we find a strong tendency to misattribute central texts, be it through the creation of pseudepigraphic texts, the attribution of anonymous material to a founding figure (e.g. Siddhartha, L. Ron Hubbard), a revered historical authority (e.g. Aristotle), or even non-existing or mythical persons (e.g. Moses, Hermes, Zoroaster).²⁴ As we shall see later in this chapter, this kind of attribution has been a central part in the making of esoteric genealogies of higher knowledge, emphasizing *prisca theologia* (whether mythical or real) like Hermes and Zoroaster, or referring to entirely fictitious “secret traditions”, such as in Rosicrucianism.

While Hobsbawm focused on how invented traditions “inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition”, analyses of such inventions in esotericism have typically focused on the function they play in legitimating authority and establishing an aura of unique authenticity. An extensive study of “the appeal to tradition” as a rhetorical strategy in modern esoteric discourse was provided by Olav Hammer in *Claiming Knowledge*, which analysed cases from the Theosophical appeal to “ancient sages” (which in 1875 were Chaldaeans, hermeticists, and kabbalists but had morphed into Hindu yogis and secret Tibetan masters by 1888), the construction of a traditional lineage for the chakra system as used in modern occultism, and the abundant reference to “imaginary utopias” such as Egypt, India, Tibet and “primitive” societies of native Americans.²⁵

At the basis of Hammer’s analysis is a sharp distinction between emic and etic historiography: the “accounts of believers” about the provenance of their doctrines and rituals constitute emic historiography, and is contrasted with the “secular studies” of professional, non-confessional historians.²⁶ Recognizing the strong critical potential of this notion – something which often tends to be downplayed even by some of the strictest historicists in the field – Hammer makes sure to note that the emic and etic historiographies are often in direct conflict, not only over emphasis and interpretation, but about basic facts of history as well. The origin of Rosicrucianism may stand as a clear example of this from the field of esotericism: in contemporary esoteric orders which claim a Rosicrucian heritage, such as Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC) or the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, one typically finds

23. See especially Lewis & Hammer, *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, which explicitly forms an expansion of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s project – thematically to the field of religion, and historically beyond the modern period. Remarkably, it took 24 years for a volume of this kind to materialize.

24. Hammer & Lewis, “Introduction”, 2–4.

25. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 85–200.

26. *Ibid.*, 86.

a literal belief that the Rosicrucian manifestos were in fact written by a pre-existing secret society with roots in the Middle Ages or possibly even further back.²⁷ In etic scholarship, however, doubts that the Rosicrucian order proclaimed by the manifestos was a fiction, which became a self-fulfilling prophecy, have long since faded. Employing the distinction between emic and etic historiography as a consistent and self-conscious methodological focus when analysing tradition and its invention thus brings us close to one of Bruce Lincoln's critical theses on method: the history of religions is, or ought to be, "a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself":

To practice history of religions ... is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically *represent themselves* as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.²⁸

And, we might add, reversing the orientation of those discourses which claim a revered and exalted "tradition" or "lineage", by emphasizing their constructed nature in temporal and material contexts.

We hold that this implicitly critical edge of historical research ought to be more explicitly recognized in studies of tradition in esotericism than has usually been the case. The recent proceedings of the inaugural conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), entitled *Constructing Tradition*,²⁹ may serve as an example. Despite its title, and with a few notable exceptions,³⁰ this volume focuses more on the internal (emic) conceptualizations of tradition, their related philosophies, theologies and mythologies, than on attempts to develop the critical analysis of appeals to "tradition" in esotericism vis-à-vis etic historiography. It furthermore diverges from the theme of "constructed traditions" by focusing also on actual practices of transmission of knowledge and their material and social bases, as a part of "tradition" in esoteric movements – hence, the precise analytic meaning of the concept becomes blurred.³¹ Knowing more about the social and material basis for actual transmissions of knowledge is obviously of value, but the continued neglect of a clear critical stance to the invention of tradition is regrettable. This point is all the more important as long as scholarly works that lack such

27. See e.g. the analysis of "Rosicrucian" tradition-making in the Golden Dawn, in Asprem, *Arguing with Angels*, chapters 3 and 5.

28. Lincoln, "Theses on Method", 225 (emphasis added).

29. Kilcher, *Constructing Tradition*.

30. See especially the articles by Philipp Theisohn, Wouter Hanegraaff, Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, Henrik Bogdan, Kocku von Stuckrad and Christine Maillard.

31. See e.g. Faivre, "Note sur la transmission"; cf. Kilcher, "Introduction", xiv.

an explicit critical distance continue to be used by practitioners in attempts at *creating* and *legitimizing* tradition. In a later section, we will turn to some more explicit and influential examples of this trend. First, however, we must delve deeper into the role that various (emic) concepts of tradition have played in the emergence of “esotericism”.

ANCIENT WISDOM NARRATIVES AND THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF “ESOTERICISM”

Notions of tradition have been central to many of the historical currents, movements, and discourses that are now studied in the field of Western esotericism. Historically, this is only to be expected: the cultural configurations or discursive formations which are commonly seen as being at the base of “esotericism” in the historical sense were formed in Renaissance intellectual cultures which typically went far to equate the antiquity of a doctrine with its truth. Functioning as special cases of arguments to authority, claims to “tradition” were thus a central feature of the “episteme” in which the classic esoteric discourses were formed.³² In fact, narratives of ancient wisdom are omnipresent in esoteric discourse, whether related to Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Moses or Orpheus, or to the increasingly more exotic ancients of modern times, such as the Atlanteans, discarnate Secret Chiefs, or even space aliens from the Pleiades. As a basic scheme, such genealogies of truth even seem to have become the core foundational narrative of esotericism from the Renaissance to the present day.³³

However, a variety of conceptions of the relation between tradition and truth existed in the Renaissance.³⁴ We might distinguish two concepts that are of particular importance for the history of esotericism: *prisca theologia*, and *philosophia perennis*. Although frequently used interchangeably, these in fact denote two quite different epistemic schemes, evaluating the relation between truth, history and tradition in quite different ways.³⁵ *Prisca theologia* refers to the notion of a “pristine theology”, revealed in a distant utopian past, and since partly lost through history. This scheme, which is associated foremost with the provocative pagan philosopher Gemistos Plethon (c. 1355–1452) and later with the humanist programme of Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), fits basic biblical

32. Cf. Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

33. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 1.

34. The following discussion of “ancient wisdom narratives” and their ultimate function in creating notions of “esotericism” is heavily indebted to Wouter Hanegraaff’s recent study, *Esotericism and the Academy*, particularly the first two chapters. As the book is at the time of writing not yet typeset, references are unfortunately only precise to the level of chapters.

35. This operative distinction seems to have been first noted in 1970 by Carl Schmitt, “*Prisca Theologia e Philosophia Perennis*”. Cf. the detailed discussion in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter one.

narratives of the Fall and the corrupting quality of temporality. As became clear in the aftermath of the Reformation and among Catholic humanist reformers, this notion of a more authentic and authoritative past had a *radical* or even revolutionary aspect to it: it meant that the discovery and diligent study of ancient source texts had the potential of “restoring” truth and overthrow modern and hence “illegitimate” innovations. This was the radical foundation of Ficino’s translations of the Platonic and Hermetic corpora, and the currents of thought which it inspired.

The notion of *philosophia perennis* was launched by the Augustinian scholar Agostino Steuco (1497–1548) in 1540, and constitutes, when taken in a strict analytic sense, a competing type of ancient wisdom narrative.³⁶ Whereas the connection between tradition and truth inherent in *prisca theologia* implied a notion of decline and corruption (nostalgia concerning the loss of truth as ages pass from a distant “Golden Age” of wisdom), *philosophia perennis* presents a scheme where wisdom is *eternal*, always present underneath the surface of any historical period. Where *prisca theologia* is radical, *philosophia perennis* has a conservative tinge: contemporary traditions are authentic and ought to be preserved, since they represent a hidden but living truth. Reform is futile. In this perennialist form, the *argumentum ad antiquitatem* can even be traced back to the early Christian church fathers, and their apologetic attempts to create legitimacy for the young religion of Christianity. Since the underlying assumption in late Hellenistic culture was that nothing could be “both new *and* true”;³⁷ church fathers like Augustine had to claim the antiquity of Christianity, even when its founders had lived only a few generations earlier and its status was that of a “new religious movement”. Thus, Augustine wrote that what

is now called the Christian religion, was with the ancients ... and it was with the human race from its beginning to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh: from when on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called the Christian.³⁸

As Wouter Hanegraaff has pointed out, the revival of *philosophia perennis* as an explicit stance by Steuco in the sixteenth century must similarly be seen as a response to the calls for reform based in part on *prisca theologia*.³⁹ It was a way to grant the antiquity of truth, while denying the need for reform, and a legitimate basis for it could readily be found in the apologists of the early church.

36. It has later been reinvented by Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), and popularized in the twentieth century by Aldous Huxley. The relevant *locus classicus* of the concept, however, is Steuco’s *De Perenni Philosophia* (1540).

37. Droge, *Homer or Moses?*, 9.

38. Augustine, quoted in Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 21.

39. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 1.

In his erudite recent study, Hanegraaff shows how the different notions of tradition implied in the ancient wisdom narratives of the Renaissance have been entirely integral to the formation and construction of “esotericism”.⁴⁰ While the Renaissance intellectuals who created the “corpus of reference” for later esoteric thought (e.g. Ficino, Pico, Reuchlin, Agrippa and others) constructed their wisdom narratives to include ancient sages such as Hermes, Zoroaster, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato, they simultaneously played a dangerous argument into the hands of a new generation of reformers who wanted to “purify” Christianity of any form of “paganism”.⁴¹ An “anti-apologetic” discourse was born in the wake of the Reformation, with the explicit aim of combating the dangerous “hostages” that the early church had taken and kept for so long: pagan philosophy, superstition, and magic. While strategies of *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis* had worked to legitimate the truth of doctrine with reference to antiquity or eternal truth, they now became the source for a suspicion that paganism had infiltrated Christianity. In the hands of these later Protestant reformers, the Renaissance “history of truth” was inverted to form a “history of error”.⁴² In their view, Zoroaster was the source of devil worship, and Plato a dangerous pagan whose ideas had infested Christian culture and especially the Roman Church. Through the application of polemical simplifications of history, all the diverse thinkers that were considered suspect of paganism, magic, or worse were lumped together and seen as representing a connected diabolical trend. With the advent of the Enlightenment, this inverted wisdom narrative was adopted by Enlightenment historians as well, now adding the many acts of treachery against reason they saw to the existing catalogue of errors. These were the first steps towards the reification of what has later become known as “esotericism”. Importantly, it took shape as a category of “rejected knowledge”, created in polemical battles to define correct religion, philosophy and, increasingly, science.

Despite the rejection, appeals to traditions of the sort discussed above continued throughout the early modern period and into late modernity. With the publication of the Rosicrucian manifestos in the early seventeenth century, and particularly with the creation of Rosicrucian orders about a century later and the development of esoteric Freemasonry, the notion that a higher knowledge from a mystic East and/or distant past has been handed down through

40. Note, however, that in addition to *philosophia perennis* and *prisca theologia*, Hanegraaff identifies a third strand of *pia philosophia*; this notion is separate from the two others in that it presupposes an element of progress or evolution in truth, as, for example, in the continuation of prophecy and extended revelation.

41. When using “paganism” in this context, we refer to emic Christian polemical discourse, where fears of alien (and evil) incursions into, or corruptions of, “True Christianity” emerge.

42. See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 2. These expressions are the titles of the first two chapters of the book, which deal with these developments.

the ages found a new form in institutional settings.⁴³ A notion of *philosophia perennis* has indeed been kept at the base of self-mythologization in Masonic contexts, and especially in the esoteric orders that were created during the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the many uses of esoteric “tradition” to provide narrative to various countercultural, anti-establishment, anti-Enlightenment, and anti-modern discourses of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may be seen as the outcome of parallel processes of tradition building and the rejection thereof, occurring during the Reformation and the Enlightenment.⁴⁵

“THE ESOTERIC/OCCULT TRADITION”: BETWEEN PRACTICE AND SCHOLARSHIP

Representing “the esoteric” and “the occult” as something of a self-contained and coherent tradition or a cluster of such has been a standard staple of older scholarly and semi-scholarly research. Frances Yates’s notion of “the Hermetic tradition” popularized such a view concerning Hermetic philosophy in the Renaissance, but it also legitimized a broader idea of a coherent oppositional intellectual and religious tradition in Europe – especially after being read and interpreted by counterculturalists of the late 1960s who used it to support their contemporary agendas.⁴⁶ The notion of an apparently stable “tradition” has also been prominent in some works by sociologists, who may additionally have been in a worse position to stay informed about the historical complexities of the matter.⁴⁷

However, the idea of a self-contained “esoteric tradition” seems to be a special case of construction of tradition that took shape especially in the context of nineteenth-century occultism. In the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and during the onset of industrialization, the professionalization and expansion of the modern sciences, and amidst nation building, imperial competition, and the development of new radical political programmes across Europe, yet another inversion and use of the “ancient wisdom narratives” was created. With the Enlightenment “history of error”

43. See e.g. McIntosh, *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason*; Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*.

44. See e.g. Bogdan, “The Sociology of the Construct of Tradition and Import of Legitimacy in Freemasonry”; Asprem, *Arguing with Angels*, chapter 3; cf. von Stuckrad, “Secrecy as Social Capital”.

45. Cf. Webb, *The Occult Underground*; Webb, *The Occult Establishment*. Connections between esoteric historiographies and wisdom narratives on the one side, and polemical “counter cultural” constructions and rejections of modern society on the other, are explored in several chapters in the present volume (see especially Chapters 10 and 12).

46. See Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and The Hermetic Tradition*; cf. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm”.

47. See for example the numerous mentions of “the esoteric tradition” in Tiryakian, “Preliminary Considerations”.

already in place, “occultist” authors found a blueprint of rejected and oppositional knowledge dealing somehow with religion as well as philosophy and science, which provided the raw materials for inventing a new “tradition” or “lineage” from which to base one’s often quite ambiguous opposition to contemporary affairs. This led to the formation of modern occultism, where one of the first and most influential tradition-builders was Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–75). It is significant that it was in this context that the noun “esotericism” started to get popularized for the first time, typically referring to a perennial tradition connected with Hermeticism, alchemy, astrology, magic, and so on, but above all with the Kabbalah, conceived of as a timeless, perennial system of wisdom.⁴⁸ This notion continued to gain currency in British occultism, as it emerged in its institutionalized forms through societies such as the Hermetic Society and the Theosophical Society, and esoteric orders of initiation such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. More influential on scholarly circles was Lévi’s English translator, the occultist and autodidact scholar of magic, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah and mysticism, Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942). Waite’s notion of “the secret tradition” encompassed all said topics, but was above all intrinsically connected to his personal brand of Christian mysticism. The “secret tradition” was thus, for him, not necessarily constrained by any direct historical continuity of thinkers, authors, texts, or even secret societies, but rather by an “invisible community” of those who had achieved exalted mystical insights.⁴⁹

While most current scholarship on Western esotericism strongly criticizes the idea of a coherent “esoteric tradition”⁵⁰ as being the result of emic historiography, one commonly comes across this view among non-specialists.⁵¹ It should also be noted that it has not altogether disappeared from specialist literature either. For example, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s introduction to Western esotericism refers to esoteric traditions in the plural, but betrays a far more essentialist position in claiming that the

48. See e.g. Lévi’s *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* and *Histoire de la Magie*, both included in the combined edition *Secrets de la Magie*. Cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 3. For the role of a reinterpreted Kabbalah as providing both tradition and innovation, see Asprem, “Kabbalah Recreata”. For recent philological and genealogical studies of the term esotericism, see especially Neugebauer-Wölk, “Der Esoteriker und die Esoterik”; Hanegraaff, “The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism”.

49. On Waite, see Robert A. Gilbert, *A. E. Waite*. Cf. his autobiography, Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought*.

50. See e.g. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm”.

51. See, e.g., the highly problematic recent work by David S. Katz, *The Occult Tradition*. Katz believes that “the occult tradition” is something really “out there”, and tries to trace “it” through Western history. Defined in terms of “the readiness to relate the unrelated”, and by a belief in the supernatural, his main objective is, bizarrely, to show how contemporary American Fundamentalism is connected to “the occult tradition” (which is sometimes also interchangeably denoted “esoteric” and “mystical”).

perennial characteristics of *the* esoteric worldview suggest ... that this is an enduring *tradition* which, though subject to some degree of social legitimacy and cultural coloration, actually reflects an autonomous and essential aspect of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos.⁵²

While (however reluctantly) accepting that socio-cultural context may have some *marginal* relevance, Goodrick-Clarke actually conceives esotericism “as such” in terms closer to the ahistorical notions of a universal *philosophia perennis*; “definitions of ‘the esoteric’ in terms of discourse, social constructions, and legitimacy” are all found wanting by Goodrick-Clarke because they “lack a hermeneutic interpretation of spirit and spirituality as *an independent ontological reality*.”⁵³ Whether conceived of in perennialist form, or as a mere self-supported historical tradition (including reworked notions of *prisca theologia*), the notion of “the occult tradition” is, in fact, where emic and etic historiography often meet.⁵⁴ When recognizing that many pioneers in the field, especially among those which Hanegraaff has termed the “generalists” in the study of esotericism,⁵⁵ have had their scholarly interest sparked by personal esoteric convictions, this is perhaps not so surprising.⁵⁶ It is problematic, however, if and when religious convictions strongly inform and filter scholarship. In the following section, we shall highlight the tradition-forming functions that easily follow certain types of scholarship.

SCHOLARS INVENTING TRADITION: THE EXAMPLE OF SHAMANISM

Moving to a more focused case study of the construction of tradition, the convoluted story of shamanism is one of the more interesting ones to assess. The construction of shamanism demonstrates the influence and confluence of a multiplex of different actors – ranging from nineteenth-century national romantics, through twentieth-century scholars, to esoteric practitioners today. Naturally, then, it is impossible to provide anything in the way of a thorough discussion in this context. For this we refer to the many volumes

52. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 13 (emphasis added).

53. *Ibid.*, 12. Italics added.

54. A good example of this is Holman, *The Return of the Perennial Philosophy*, which has the subtitle *The Supreme Wisdom of Western Esotericism*. The book strives to be something in the sort of a scholarly examination (but fails miserably), and the inclusion of “Western Esotericism” in the subtitle can probably be attributed to intentions of aligning it to the academic field of the same name. The impact of scholarship on esotericism is discussed further on in this chapter.

55. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm”, 24–5.

56. See for example the importance of the Eranos circle on the early scholarship of Antione Faivre: Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 4.

that have been produced on the various topics and themes converging here.⁵⁷ Instead, we will venture on a short discussion, focused both on the role played by esoteric discourse in the construction of shamanism and the influence later asserted back on esoteric discourse – thus demonstrating how esoteric discourse is interweaved with other social and cultural factors and trends.

We will start with the fervour of national romanticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and turn the gaze to Finland. This particular country is a good starting point as it is here that we can discern some of the first steps in projecting shamanism as a “universal and ancient” religious technique, and where we still to this very day find scholars engaged in this project.⁵⁸ First a few words on Romanticism. This period or movement, particularly strong in its German variant from the late eighteenth century but spreading through Europe like wildfire, was in many ways a backlash to the Enlightenment and its ideals. Where the latter emphasized things like (“modern”) scientific rationality, civilization, and universality, Romantics instead valued the mystical, natural/organic, and particular.⁵⁹ It is in this process that we see the birth of the nation state – i.e. the invention of nationalist traditions, as emphasized by Hobsbawm – with Germany again on the forefront. Here, the idea of the *Völksggeist* – a “folk spirit” uniting all people of a particular heritage and binding them together in the nation – was first articulated. In this context we also find the “first wave” of Germanic neopaganism – as a “folk-oriented” religiosity to replace universalistic Christianity – as well as examples of the racialism that would later find violent political expression in the regime of the National Socialist party in the 1930s.⁶⁰

This is where we turn to Finland. This country, having been a province of Sweden until 1809 when it became an autonomous Grand Duchy of Tsarist Russia, was caught up in the national romantic winds just like other European countries. In Finland, language politics were intimately tied to nationalist concerns. Swedish had been the language of the educated and the ruling class while under the governance of Sweden, and this continued to be the case under Russia. From the 1820s onwards, the Fennoman movement – with the goal of adopting Finnish as the official, main (and often only) language of Finland – was born, and it gained strength in the subsequent decades. Many in the earlier Swedish-speaking privileged classes adopted Finnish – which up

57. For discussions on the scholarly construction of shamanism, see e.g. Svanberg, *Schamanantropologi*; von Stuckrad, *Schamanismus und Esoterik*; Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*. For the role of Eliade and the Eranos meetings, see e.g. Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion*.

58. Notable examples are Juha Pentikäinen (1940–), emeritus professor in comparative religion at Helsinki University, and Anna-Leena Siikala (1943–), emeritus professor in folkloristics at the same university.

59. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 419.

60. See Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 20–22; Gregorius, *Modern Asatro*, 55–64; cf. Granholm, “Sons of Northern Darkness”; Granholm, “Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes”.

until now had been the language of peasants – as their language of choice, and even changed their surnames to appear more Finnish, often by direct translation (e.g. Juho Kusti Paasikivi, president of Finland from 1946 to 1956, was Christened Johan Gustaf Hellstén).⁶¹ In this process of forging a national culture and identity legitimacy was needed, and thus the study of Finnish folklore was born. Vast numbers of promising young scholars, both university educated and amateurs, ventured out to the Finnish countryside to collect folktales – remnants of “authentic and original” Finnish culture, it was claimed. Part of this project of Finlandizing Finland was the creation of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, by Elias Lönnrot (1802–84) in the mid-1800s (the “old” *Kalevala* in 1835–6, and the extended “new” *Kalevala* in 1849); not as an authentic example of collected tales, but as a conglomerate of folk tales and the embellishments and innovations of Lönnrot, all in order to create an epic in the image of its classic Greek counterparts.⁶²

Soon, Finnish folklorists ventured out to seek “the roots” of the Finnish folk, and it is here we come across some of the first (semi-)professional ethnography that would lay the foundation of the study of shamanism – as well as the creation of that particular subject. Matias Aleksanteri Castren (1813–53), who “actively moulded Finnish cultural nationalism,”⁶³ was one of the first in this regard. He wanted to prove the antiquity of Finnish culture and find the original homeland of the Finnish folk, and for this effect he did ethnography in Siberia. His book *Vorlesungen über die Finnische Mythologie*, published in 1853, inspired later influential authors such as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell. Several other Finnish ethnographers followed in Castren’s footsteps in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These included the father of Finnish comparative religion, Uno Harva-Holmberg (1882–1949), who explored “cross-culturally Eurasian shamanism as a universal Finno-Ugric-Altai system.”⁶⁴

The popularization of shamanism in the public consciousness can be attributed to two authors in particular: Carlos Castaneda and Mircea Eliade.⁶⁵ Castaneda was studying anthropology at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) from 1959, and wrote a term paper focused on the use of the *Datura*

61. In 1906, 24,800 people were reported to have “Finlandized” their names. This paled to later developments, though, as more than 100,000 people changed their names in the years 1935–6 alone. Thilman, “Suvuista ja nimistä”.

62. Similar folkloristic programmes existed all over Europe at the time, strongly connected with nationalist creations of identity. The folk tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany, Peter Christian Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe’s collection and publication of *Norske Folkeeventyr* (*Norwegian Fairytales*) in the 1840s can be viewed this way, as might the “Celtic revival” in Britain somewhat later, not to mention the national romantic furore over the spoof “Scots Gaelic” poems in James Macpherson’s *Ossian*.

63. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 28.

64. *Ibid.*, 32.

65. *Ibid.*, 165.

plant in Mexican indigenous religious practices,⁶⁶ later expanded into an MA thesis and published in 1968 as *The Teachings of Don Juan*. In this book, and a whole series of later ones, Castaneda expounds on his apprenticeship with the Yaqui Indian Shaman Don Juan Matus, focusing on vivid tales of “entering another reality”. He was even awarded a PhD degree in 1973 for the third book in the series, *Journey to Ixtlan* (1972).⁶⁷ The books became, and still remain, hugely popular, launching (neo)shamanism⁶⁸ as a countercultural trend in the late 1960s and 1970. However, even in the 1970s critics convincingly argued that Castaneda’s research was most likely to have been conducted in libraries rather than in the field, and that his “apprenticeship” with “Don Juan” was probably fictional. Still, Castaneda’s books continue to be influential among religious practitioners, and even remained examples of ideal ethnography in anthropological circles for a very long time. Znamenski attributes this to a changing academic climate in the 1960s, with increasing concerns to “validate the native’s point of view”.⁶⁹ Interestingly, Castaneda’s anthropological supporters continued to regard his work as “validating the native’s point of view”⁷⁰ even though Castaneda never actually presented the views of any natives! Another interesting example is Michael Harner, who started out as an anthropologist, but moved to be a spokesperson for neoshamanism with his *The Way of the Shaman*, published in 1980. His notion of “core shamanism”, the universal building blocks of shamanism worldwide, is even discussed by Michael Winkelman in his article on shamanism in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, and included in the bibliography of Mircea Eliade in an article on the same theme in the volume.⁷¹

It is Mircea Eliade who is of greatest interest when it comes to esoteric influences in the invention of shamanism as an “archaic and universal tradition”. Eliade is among the most influential scholars in the history of the study of religion, and “almost certainly the most familiar name in the field”⁷² outside scholarly quarters. In regard to shamanism, he not only popularized it in his *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964, original French edition in

66. For a discussion of the use of hallucinogenic substances in esoteric contexts, and the popularization of the phenomenon, see Chapter 19 of the present volume.

67. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 191, 189–93.

68. The term neoshamanism is even more problematic than “paganism” or “neopaganism” (for a discussion on these terms, see footnote 1 on page 1 of the present volume). If “shamanism” is itself a construction, then the addition of “neo” to indicate modern reconstructions would seem unnecessary. However, the distinction is motivated in distinguishing scholarly constructions of pre-modern, non-Western religious “traditions” from modern Western reconstructions based on these. That is, we are dealing with second-order constructions here.

69. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 195–6, 205–14.

70. Douglas Sharon, quoted in *Ibid.*, 209.

71. Winkelman, “Shamanism”, 8275–6; Eliade, “Shamanism”, 8274.

72. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 8.

1951), but also popularized the idea of it as a universal religious technique, cross-cultural and ahistoric, and the “original” form of religiosity.⁷³ However, the term “shamanism” is problematic when used to refer to religious phenomena beyond those relating to the Tungusic cultures the word originates in, and becomes increasingly problematic when considering the extremely broad application it has been put to. As early as the early 1960s the concept of shamanism had been expanded to include the Eskimos,⁷⁴ Native Americans,⁷⁵ Hungarians,⁷⁶ and even Biblical stories.⁷⁷ Other locations include the Saami culture,⁷⁸ “Finno-Ugric cultures,”⁷⁹ Ireland⁸⁰ and, quite recently, Africa.⁸¹

As is now widely recognized, Eliade’s phenomenological project was intimately tied to his religionist concerns.⁸² In his youth – and continuing to his death – Eliade was greatly influenced by René Guénon – author and founder of the Traditionalist school of esoteric thought.⁸³ The central concerns of Traditionalism were the critique of Western modernity and the pursuit of “authentic primordial tradition”. For example, the term “reintegration” that was central to Eliade’s work, as well as his very conception of “tradition”, was most likely to have been derived from Guénon,⁸⁴ and his *Cosmos and History* – better known in English by its original subtitle, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* – can be compared with Guénon’s *Crisis of the Modern World* (1927) and fellow Traditionalist Julius Evola’s *Revolt Against the Modern World* (1934).⁸⁵ Eliade was an active participant, from 1949 to 1976, in the Eranos meetings arranged in Ascona, Switzerland, since 1933. There he congregated with figures such as Carl Gustav Jung, Gershom Scholem, Henry Corbin, and Joseph Campbell⁸⁶ – all respected and influential scholars in their respective fields and, even more importantly, influenced by similar esoteric–Traditionalist views, and in turn highly influential on later esotericism.

73. Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 165–80. The idea of the antiquity of shamanism has been criticized by, among others, Sidky, “On the Antiquity of Shamanism and its Role in Human Religiosity”.

74. Holtved, “Eskimo Shamanism”.

75. Hultkrantz, “Spirit Lodge”.

76. Fazekas, “Hungarian Shamanism, Material and History of Research”.

77. Kapelrud, “Shamanic Features in the Old Testament”.

78. E.g. Hultkrantz, “Aspects of Saami (Lapp) Shamanism”.

79. Corradi-Musi, “Supernatural Heroes in Finno-Ugric Shamanism”.

80. Karjala, “Aspects of the Other World in Irish Folk Tradition”.

81. See Znamenski, *The Beauty of the Primitive*, 188.

82. On the “Jung–Eliade school of thought”, see Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 23.

83. On Guénon and Traditionalism, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*. On later Traditionalist influences, see Granholm, “The Rune-Gild”; and Chapter 12 in the present volume.

84. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 38, 40.

85. *Ibid.*, 46. On the influence of Traditionalism on Eliade, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 109–16.

86. On Eranos, particularly with reference to Eliade, Corbin and Scholem, see Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*.

It should also be noted that the father of the modern school of the study of Western esotericism, Antoine Faivre, also participated in the Eranos meetings in the 1970s, and had particularly close relations to Henry Corbin. Together with Corbin, Faivre was even the co-founder, in 1974, of a fiercely religionist French offshoot of the Eranos meetings, called the *Université Saint Jean de Jérusalem*. Conceived of as a “counter-university”, an “international center for comparative spiritual research” dedicated to reviving esoteric knowledge and fighting the evils of the modern world, the group counted a great number of early specialists of esoteric subjects among its members – including Eliade himself. As carefully documented by Hanegraaff, this platform was something of a laboratory for Faivre’s ideas about esotericism in his most religionist period, which would last until approximately the end of the 1980s.⁸⁷

Returning to shamanism, what we perceive here is a complex tangled web of inventions of tradition. Scholarly inquiry was linked to the quest for national identity and tradition, and the creation of shamanism as a “universal and archaic technique” indeed revolves around the creation of perennial tradition – at the same time influencing, and being influenced by, esoteric discourse. Furthermore, the case of Eliade makes it clear that essentially perennialist notions of tradition, similar to the idea of *philosophia perennis* discussed earlier, have asserted a strong influence on scholarly constructs such as shamanism, which in the next instance have informed actual practices and emic notions of tradition and connection with an archaic authentic past. We shall now continue to discuss aspects of this latter step in more detail.

SCHOLARS READ: ESOTERICISM BECOMES AN OBJECT

Scholars and scholarship do not exist in isolation; rather, they co-inhabit their world with their research subjects and readers. When it comes to studies of (particularly modern) esotericism, the researched and the reader are often the same person. This has major implications for scholarship in the field. Most current major scholars of esotericism stress the scholarly constructed nature of their research field,⁸⁸ asserting that “[e]sotericism’ does not exist as an object”.⁸⁹ However, with esoteric actors becoming increasingly familiar with scholarship from the field of Western esotericism, esotericism is indeed *becoming* an object. It is actively created as such by esotericists who are influenced and informed by the scholarship they actively and eagerly consume. We

87. For the full detailed discussion of the development of Faivre’s career, and the various cultural and social influences on his work, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter 4.

88. See e.g. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 402; Hanegraaff, “The Study of Western Esotericism”, 489–91; Hammer, “Esotericism in New Religious Movements”, 445.

89. von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism”, 9.

will provide a brief example of this process. In the Sweden-originated magic order Dragon Rouge, founder and head ideologist Thomas Karlsson – who is also a scholar of Western esotericism, having earned a doctorate in 2010 at Stockholm University for a thesis on the seventeenth-century rune mystic Johannes Bureus⁹⁰ – has presented an analysis of his order grounded in Antoine Faivre’s conceptualization of esotericism.⁹¹ This text, directed to practicing magicians rather than to an academic audience, implies that⁹² esoteric actors may easily draw on scholarship in order to align themselves to “the primordial/perennial tradition” as described by scholars – to more properly represent esotericism as “authorized” by scholarly authorities, who are much respected by many in the esoteric milieu. This invention of “esoteric tradition” is in many ways similar to the invention of “shamanistic tradition”, discussed above, in the pivotal role played by academic authors. It is different, however, in that tradition is here created in *lieu* of scholarly insistence that no such tradition exists, rather than with active scholarly participation in the process of construction. In a sense, the notion of a “tradition” thus emerging is the result of a “fetishistic” reading of scholarship on esotericism.

An implication of these factors is that, when studying the esoteric in the contemporary world, we might need to expand our view to include not only “esotericists” – or only esoteric discourse, to use Kocku von Stuckrad’s term – but rather the broader field of “discourse on the esoteric” (i.e. all actors who engage with the esoteric in one way or another). Thus actors “relegating” phenomena to the field of the esoteric and occult (including scholars such as Truzzi as well as non-scholarly detractors), proponents of esoteric worldviews and philosophies, as well as more neutral scholars, are all participants on this field of discourse. This approach is foreshadowed by Wouter Hanegraaff’s more recent work, where he approaches the issue of how certain phenomena have been produced as “rejected knowledge” in polemical and othering discourses, and through scholarship with various types of hidden (and not so hidden) agendas.⁹³ However, instead of only looking at opponents and proponents, more neutral scholarly commentators should be included as well, as should the material dimensions of contemporary scholarship. The creation of specialist journals (e.g. *Esoterica*; *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*), specialist book series (e.g. SUNY’s *Western Esoteric Traditions*), and even scholarly organizations (Association for the Study of Esotericism; ESSWE) and study programmes (the University of Amsterdam programme in “Mysticism and Western Esotericism”, and Exeter University’s Centre for the

90. Karlsson, *Götisk Kabbala och Runisk Alkemi*.

91. Karlsson, “Esoterism and the Left-Hand Path”.

92. For reflections on the constructivist ontology inherent in this claim, see e.g. the many thought-provoking essays and reviews in Hacking, *Historical Ontology*.

93. Hanegraaff, “Forbidden Knowledge”; Hanegraaff, “The Trouble with Images”; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

Study of Esotericism), all using the term esotericism to signify “something” that they are “about”, significantly contributes to the reification of the category in the general audience – *despite* the explicated contrary intentions of most scholars in the field.

FICTION, POPULAR CULTURE AND THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

That fiction and popular culture can play an important part in the construction of identities and traditions is something that scholars increasingly start to acknowledge.⁹⁴ Still, few scholars other than Christopher Partridge have explicitly discussed the role of popular culture in religious change, or the significance of the esoteric in this context.⁹⁵ While the importance of fiction in this regard can logically be assumed to have increased under the impact of modern entertainment media (e.g. television, movies, mass-produced music, etc.) and new interactive media (particularly the Internet and social networking sites), the phenomenon is in no way new. The example of Rosicrucianism is a good demonstration. While perhaps not being the first instance of fiction having a profound effect on the esoteric, Rosicrucianism is certainly one of the most influential examples, and one of the few that scholars of Western esotericism make regular notice of. Although the fictional background of this current is not disregarded by scholars, it is an aspect which is still seldom sufficiently acknowledged, and has yet to be treated in a theoretically interesting way. The Rosicrucian current was instigated with the publication of two spoof pamphlets, *Fama Fraternitatis* (1614) and *Confessio Fraternitatis* (1615), followed by an alchemically loaded play, the *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosencreutz anno 1459* (1616). All texts were published anonymously; however, the last one has been unambiguously attributed to the (at that time very young) German theologian Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654), while the two earlier manifestos seem to have been collaborative effort by Andreae and a circle of his friends and colleagues.⁹⁶

The works presented the story of Christian Rosenkreutz, who, we are told, came in possession of significant esoteric secrets while travelling in the Middle East, and subsequently founded a fraternity in the fifteenth century. While being technically pieces of fiction, the manifestos were long taken to be genuine communications from an existing secret order dedicated to a “universal and general reformation of the whole world”. They sparked a furore of debates for and against the Rosicrucians in the early to middle decades of the seventeenth century. Eventually, numerous *actual* Rosicrucian societies were

94. E.g. Gordon Lynch, “The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies”; Lynn Schofield Clark, “Religion, Twice removed”.

95. Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West*. See also Chapter 6 in this volume.

96. See e.g. Edighoffer, “Rosicrucianism I”, 1009.

formed, all claiming to represent the “true” legacy of the fictitious Christian Rosenkreutz. Here we can also discern the role played by changing means of mediation: the impact of the Rosicrucian manifestos would never have been as immense as it was without the possibility of mass distribution offered by the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Rosicrucianism has remained an influential element in the esoteric milieu, with an increased importance through its impact on Freemasonry, and through major organizations such as AMORC (founded as late as 1915) claiming its heritage. In Freemasonry, the models of Rosicrucian societies and vocational guilds fused to form an initiatory society, which in turn came to function as a model for many later magical orders, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (founded in 1888).

In the nineteenth century we find several more examples of fiction influencing “esoteric” currents, such as Emma Hardinge Britten’s books – which further influenced the creation of later initiatory magical orders – and Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s hugely influential novel *Zanoni* – which, among many other things, spread the idea of semi-immortal Rosicrucian “secret chiefs”. In the twentieth century and beyond, the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft has similarly asserted an immense influence on occultism.

In more recent times, science fiction has been a significant source for religious innovations, and has often been coupled with the esoteric in these processes.⁹⁷ The most familiar example of this, and arguably one of the clearest, is Scientology.⁹⁸ The founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, was a prolific science fiction author, and many of the elements permeating his fictional work seem to have influenced the doctrines of Scientology as well. Even more recent examples are Jediism and Matrixism.⁹⁹ The former was created as a religion in religious census surveys in English-speaking countries. Pleas to write down “Jedi” as a religious orientation were posted online in advance of the census, with astounding results (in New Zealand 1.5 per cent of the population did so).¹⁰⁰ What started as a joke has apparently become a serious religious-philosophical conviction for many people, not in the form of fundamentalist belief in the truthfulness of the Star Wars movies but as an appreciation of the perceived spirituality and philosophy in them. In terms of the esoteric it is interesting to note that George Lucas was highly influenced by the works of Joseph Campbell when writing the movies. Campbell, as noted earlier, was a participant of the Eranos meetings, and represents the general esoteric–Traditionalist ethos of Eranos.¹⁰¹ Matrixism, formed in 2004,¹⁰² is based on the

97. As briefly noted by Granholm Chapter 15 of this volume.

98. See Chapter 9 of this volume for more information on both Scientology and its esoteric/occult connections.

99. Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 120–32.

100. *Ibid.*, 125.

101. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 85, 140, 142–3.

102. Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 113.

Wachowski brothers' Matrix trilogy, which, as several scholars have noted, in many regards represents a "neo-gnostic" philosophy influenced by individualistic interpretations of Buddhism.¹⁰³ Esoteric discourse can certainly be conceived of as playing a part, as the movies – and thus Matrixism as a religion – revolves around the idea of knowledge providing the power to shape reality.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has taken us through an admittedly large, confusing and complex array of themes and discussions. Nevertheless, certain main points may be summarized and drawn together.

First of all, we have made an argument concerning the way one should fruitfully approach the concept of "tradition" itself. Rather than operationalizing "tradition" as an analytical tool to look at, for example, means of transmission, coherence and autonomy of cultural systems, structural distinctions between "modern" and "pre-modern" societies, and so on, we have argued that a constructivist approach to the invention of tradition is a more promising path. For this kind of constructivism to succeed, one should furthermore combine historical and sociological approaches, and fully acknowledge the critical potential of the project.

Second, these discussions have consequences for the study of contemporary esotericism. We have suggested that there are especially two types of often overlooked co-producers of tradition whose roles need to be highlighted if the broadly constructivist programme drawn up in this article is to be followed, namely: the role of scholarship, and the role of fiction and popular culture. While both of these have in fact been in operation at least since the early modern period, they have become increasingly important in the present day. Also, because of our own embeddedness in contemporary culture, they may be somewhat harder to spot; they are, so to speak, "hidden in plain sight". In the case of popular culture, the media revolutions of the late twentieth century, and the popularization of esoteric motifs that is unquestionably occurring in and through it, lead to the production of new source materials which become resources for constructions of tradition and identity. Fictitious or not, these cultural products do make an unprecedented number of historical and mythological narratives connected with the esoteric, as well as elements ripe for the construction of such, available to wide (and new) audiences. Tracing the consequences of this must be a concern of the study of contemporary esotericism.

When it comes to the role of scholarship, the question is even more complex, as we have seen. A highly significant and overlooked question at the

103. See e.g. Flannery-Dailey & Wagner, "Wake Up!"; Bowman, "The Gnostic Illusion".

present time is the influence that our very own research area is asserting on practices and self-conceptions “in the field”. That occultists and neopagans are avid readers of works produced by scholars of esotericism is no secret, and we know historically that cultural knowledge produced or repackaged by academia, having received its official stamp of “quality goods” (with all its attendant commodity fetishism), tends to become a sought-after commodity in the more literate milieus of practitioners. In this light, some of the strategies wielded in order to claim an independent identity for “Western esotericism” as a more or less autonomous academic field may, regardless of the actual intentions and even explicit statements of some of those involved, have conferred cultural legitimacy onto practitioners who want to identify with something like a unique “esoteric tradition” as well. This calls for an increased emphasis on scholarly reflexivity in the field, particularly when questions of identity, essence, and tradition are at stake.